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Selina

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SELINA

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JOANNA GODDEN MARRIED
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SELINA

By
Sheila Kaye-Smith



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SELINA

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FIRST EDITION

I-K

This story was originally published in England under the title of *Selina Is Older*

To "BAA"

WITH LOVE AND APOLOGIES

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SELINA

Introduction and Plan of the Markwick Gardens

§ I

THE CHILDREN WENT TO PLAY IN THE MARKWICK GARDENS almost every fine afternoon. They liked going there better than to the beach, which was hot and shingly and covered with terrifying strangers. The Gardens had all the comfort of the familiar combined with the lure of the mysterious, and though you might think that Selina and Moira would soon have exhausted their rather meagre possibilities, the interest and excitement waxed rather than waned as the months went by.

In fact the Gardens were not so much gardens as a landscape, and not so much a landscape as a background to life and adventure. They were divided, roughly, into three lawns—the Flower Lawn, the Tennis Lawn, and the Lower Lawn. The Flower Lawn was the Gardens' committee's offering to the adjoining neighbourhood, which could view from its upper windows a green expanse carved with flower-beds and painted all the summer through with geraniums, calceolaria and lobelia.

The children did not care much for the Flower Lawn, which was hedged about with too many restrictions. The cross old gardener, secretly known as Froggy, would always run out at you from behind the thickets of laurel and euonymus that guarded his cottage if you

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so much as jumped over the narrowest piece of one of the beds; and though Selina had a deeply rooted passion for flowers she could not really like Froggy's, because of this and because she knew that there was not the slightest chance of her ever being allowed to pick them.

The flower-beds were very pretty to look at, but so bristling with prohibitions as to be rather frightening—they both attracted and repelled, like the Ten Commandments in church. The children found their pleasure rather in their outskirts, where there were some big bushes suitable for games of “touch” or “catch,” where also stood an arbour of sycamores sheltering a swing.

Their favourite part of the garden, however, was the Tennis Lawn opposite the summer house. The summer house was circular, and faced the Flower Lawn as well, but Nurse always sat in a section facing the Tennis Lawn, which she regarded as a safe and suitable place for the children to play. It was divided into three tennis courts, but that made no difference, because they were used only after tea, when the big girls from the Hastings and St. Leonards' Ladies' College came in to play tennis. In the eighteen-nineties tennis was still only a game, and when it was not actually being played no one objected to Moira and Selina running to and fro on the knotty sward or squatting over a dolls' tea-party among the daisies which grew unafraid of Froggy's weekly passage with the mowing-machine.

On three sides of the lawn was a bank—a bank romantic with the little wild flowers which were the only flowers in the Gardens that you might pick. Selina loved them, especially on Tuesdays, the day before the

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mowing, when they had grown quite thick and important. There was a little pink convolvulus, too, which she had been told was a wild flower and might be gathered off the beds from among forbidden geraniums.

Only sometimes had she a sense of loss and almost of pity for the frail, humble stars of the coltsfoot and daisies, the yellow dishes of eggs-and-bacon, the pink and white tufts of the clover, and that was in September when they came home from Platnix Farm.

They went to Platnix every summer with Nurse for a couple of months while Father and Mother were abroad, and for the first few days after they came back Selina's heart would be heavy and aching with a sickness for the lost fields, with an emptiness which no amount of tennis lawns or grass banks could fill. Then sometimes she would hide her face among the brown grasses and the little flowers of the grass with their sugary, insipid smell, and feel her eyes swell and burn with tears for the spurge-green hollows of Flatroper's Wood or for the corner of Westfield Lane where the tansy and vetches grew in a tangle of purple and gold. Her "home-sickness" for Platnix was always disapproved of by Mother and Nurse, because it wasn't really her home; so she was glad to have a little flowery corner for private grief, even though the flowers themselves could only murmur to her of what she had lost.

There was another and happier emotion associated with Platnix which also had its scene in the Gardens, and that was the Quiet Delight. For about two weeks before they were due to go, the shadow—or rather the gleam—of Platnix Farm would lie across the nursery. Nurse would be sorting out their clothes to decide which were to go with them and which were to be

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left behind, trunks would be emptied of their winter store and prepared for summer travel, and Mother would come into the nursery with letters from Mrs. Huggett, the farmer's wife, saying how pleased she would be to see them and giving bits of farm news.

Then a kind of peaceful happiness would fill Selina—not the tearing, restless happiness that would possess her for the last two or three days, but something dreamy and gentle, that made her want to be by herself and think of Platnix. In the Gardens she did not care to play, but would wander about the paths, or along the great arbutus hedge that bordered the Tennis Lawn, till Nurse called out to her not to be selfish but to come and play with Moira. The Quiet Delight finally flamed into the Rapture (which strangely enough had the effect of sometimes making Selina extremely cross) and then after two or three days which must have been most trying to her elders, they were off to the fields and woods and barns and oast-houses, forgetting all slighter pleasures till it was time to come back and draw what comfort from them they could.

§ 2

A number of other children played in the Gardens, but few came as regularly as the little girls—some because they had large gardens at home, some because their parents and nurses preferred the seashore as a place of recreation. Selina and Moira were allowed to play only with those children whose mothers were on calling-terms with their own, but this meant almost everyone, since there could be few subscribers to a

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small, select Square Garden whom the doctor's wife did not visit. As for those few children outside the pale, whose mothers were never called on by Mrs. South on those days when she set out with her sweet-smelling cedarwood card case in her husband's brougham, they did not provide anything like the temptation you might have expected. Neither Selina nor Moira was of a rebellious temperament, or inclined to question the order of her world. Forbidden fruit was terrifying rather than enticing—like those sinisterly beautiful coils of deadly nightshade that Nurse sometimes brought home from an autumn walk to drape round the nursery gas-bracket—and they had so readily accepted the conventions of their upbringing that they rejected with downright horror such few overtures as were sometimes made by the untouchables.

A more difficult matter of submission had been the rule that they must never go down to the Lower Lawn without Nurse. The Lower Lawn lay beyond the arbutus border of the Tennis Lawn, at the foot of a flight of steps, leading down, mossy and dark, under the enticing golden balls of an enormous buddleia. The Lower Lawn had two divisions, separated by a hedge of laurustinus, one given over to grown-ups and croquet and the other to big boys and cricket. Neither was a really suitable playground for little girls, but they both had the sinister attraction of the unknown. Besides, all the other children, apparently, were allowed to go down to the Lower Lawn, and Selina and Moira sometimes felt inferior in their exclusion.

The day when Selina succeeded in spending the whole afternoon in this forbidden place stood out long afterwards as a landmark in her life, though the cir-

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cumstances were far from creditable. She and Moira had just made friends with some new children—a family called Clifford who had lately come to live in Normandy Road. Pearly, the eldest girl, was eight, just a year older than Selina, whom she chose from the beginning to be her special friend.

It was the first time that Selina had had another little girl for a friend. Hitherto, other children had been just children without distinction; they had played in groups, never pairing off or making particular friendships. But the Souths and the Cliffords hadn't been playing together long before Pearly suddenly seized Selina's hand and whispered: "Let's run away from Moira and the babies," and off they had gone, down the long grass path at the back of the Tennis Lawn, leaving Moira alone with Leslie, aged six, and Baby Bee, aged two.

Moira had started to run after them, followed by Leslie, but they could not catch up to Selina and Pearly who ran much faster. "Come on—come on!" whispered Pearly, and dragged Selina down the forbidden Steps, into a part of the garden where she had hardly ever been before. The whole of that afternoon was a wild adventure—a scutter up and down strange paths or across strange lawns, dodging round strange bushes, with Moira and Leslie drearily in pursuit. The little ones never gave up the chase, nor did the elder ones ever think of any better entertainment than eluding them. The two friends felt no need of conversation to cement their friendship, which demanded no more of them than to rush about wildly hand in hand, screaming before a common foe. That the foe was their nearest and dearest and only wanted to play with them made

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no difference, though Selina had one awkward vision over her shoulder of Moira's tear-stained face toiling after her down a shrubby path, her fat legs weary, her overall green with a recent fall.

Nurse, however, awaiting their return in the summer-house, took a different view.

"You're a very unkind little girl, Selina, to run away like that from your sister—and into the Lower Gardens, too. You know you're not allowed to go there."

"It was quite all right. There was nobody there except ourselves."

"That isn't the point. And going down the Steps wasn't half so naughty as running away from Moira. Poor little girl! She couldn't understand why you did it, and she's quite tired out running after you."

"She shouldn't have come," muttered Selina. "I wanted to be with Pearly."

"There's no reason whatever why you and Pearly and Moira and Leslie shouldn't have played nicely together instead of running about like that, and if you do it again, I'll tell your mother."

Selina was bewildered. For the first time in her life she felt a claim from which Moira must be definitely excluded. She knew that whatever Nurse said she would want to run away again with Pearly. But she supposed she mustn't, or Nurse would tell Mother and perhaps they wouldn't be allowed to go to the Gardens for quite a long time—perhaps forever (Selina's imagination never stopped short of the uttermost). She would, however, make plain to everyone that Pearly was her special friend—Moira should not rob her of what she felt to be her life's achievement. "I've got a little girl for a friend"—and another milestone had been passed.

CHAPTER ONE

Five Buns

§ I

SELINA WOULD NEVER FORGET THE DAY SHE FIRST SAW Pearly Clifford. (Nor, incidentally, would she forget the day she last saw her, though she often tried to do so.) There had lately been very few children in the Gardens—quite often only Selina and Moira themselves—and for that reason they had brought out the Lodge, which normally they played with only in the privacy of the nursery.

The Lodge was a collection of disreputable toy animals living together in a sort of orphanage presided over by Phyllis Kind-Friend (Selina) and Eleanor Kind-Friend (Moira). The secrecy which surrounded it was not due to shame but rather to an urge to hide from the gaze of the outer world anything so deeply and personally loved. Only once or twice in its history had it ever been brought into the Gardens, carefully packed in a doll's perambulator, and the two Kind-Friends became very much like surprised mallards on

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a pond when on that special afternoon they saw the gate into Normandy Road open and admit some unknown children.

"Quick, Sister!" cried Phyllis Kind-Friend—"put the Lodge back in the pram."

"Why? they aren't looking at us."

"They will as soon as they get to the summer-house. They'll think it's dolls. Quick, I say!"

Topsy, Tiny, Rosamond, Peeler and the other seedy inmates of the Lodge were snatched up from a meal they were beginning to enjoy and thrust back into the darkness of the pram. Phyllis and Eleanor Kind-Friend thereupon lost their occupation and became Selina and Moira South.

"What shall we do now?" asked Moira.

"Nothing. I want to watch those children."

They watched the party go round the summer-house, to establish itself in a section facing the flower-beds. It consisted of a little girl and a little boy, a baby and a nurse. Selina and Moira watched them first from a distance; then Moira, always the bolder of the two, trotted up to the summer-house and disappeared behind it. The next minute she came trotting back again.

"Nurse," she cried in tones of delight—"there's a little girl at the back of the summer-house who's made a face at me."

"Oh, I know—*those* children," said Nurse in expressive tones. "I hope you didn't take any notice."

"I didn't take *much* notice," said Moira reluctantly.

"Well, don't take any notice at all. Come and play over here, where I can see you."

It was difficult to know what to play at, since they didn't dare take out the Lodge again. Nurse suggested

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making daisy-chains, and they sat for some time rather tamely busy, while the screams and laughter of the other children came to them from the Flower Lawn.

Evidently the little boy and girl enjoyed more freedom than Moira and Selina. It was tantalising to hear them disport themselves so freely and noisily on half-forbidden ground. After a while they came back to the summer-house, for a gabble of cheerful noises came through the partition; no doubt they had gone to sit with their nurse. Selina longed to go and look at them; she was jealous of Moira's honour and privilege in being made a face at. Perhaps if she went and looked at her the little girl would make a face at her too . . . She decided to gratify herself with the spectacle that had so entranced her sister.

Nurse did not see her go, as she was busy with a particularly large and difficult darn in Moira's overall. Selina walked up to a hydrangea bush a few yards away on the Flower Lawn, then peered back over her shoulder. There, beside the nurse and the little boy and the curly-headed baby, sat a little girl in a sailor dress—a little girl with very dark brown eyes, and dark curly hair and a face which somehow made Selina immediately decide that Trimmer looked like that.

Trimmer—unromantically named after one of her father's horses—was the darling child of Selina's imagination, through whom she enjoyed the freedoms, possessions, beauties and powers that daily life denied a little girl of seven. Unfortunately she was only semi-private, and her lustre was already dimmed by Moira's rival creation of Pearl, who made rare but catastrophic appearances for the sole purpose of rolling Trimmer in the common clay. At this moment there was no

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fear of Pearl, and Selina solemnly made a resolution—though even now aware that she would break it—of keeping forever to herself that vision of Trimmer's black eyes and curls, her soft wild-rose complexion, her neat blue sailor dress and grown-up stockings—no childish white socks for Trimmer any more than for this lucky little girl.

At that moment her deputy heroine made a face at her, a gesture not entirely unprovoked, as Selina had been staring at her hard for at least two minutes. The latter was startled and a trifle shocked. This little girl had become so fused with Trimmer that it was for a moment as if Trimmer herself had screwed up her eyes and twisted her lips round the point of a pink tongue. She withdrew hurriedly and trotted back to Nurse. By the time she reached her she had separated the world of fancy from the world of fact.

"She made a face at me too," she said half proudly.

"Who?—that child again? I told you not to go near her. What have you been doing?"

"I only went to look at the hydrangea."

"Well, you're not to look at the hydrangea. Go down there on the grass and play with Moira."

"I don't know what to play at."

"You're being very tiresome, Selina. Why can't you play quietly and amuse yourself like other little girls?"

"The little girl isn't playing either. There's nobody to play with. I wish there were some other children in the Gardens today."

"If wishes were horses, beggars would ride," said Nurse maddeningly.

Selina sighed, twisted on one foot, gazed at Moira—now impossible as a companion, being engaged in

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picking dandelions, a flower Selina was afraid of—and felt suddenly and surprisingly rebellious.

“Nurse, *why* mayn’t I play with that little girl?”

“You know perfectly well why, Selina. Besides, I shouldn’t think you’d want to play with anyone so rude as to make faces.”

“But I *do* want to play with her.”

“Then I’m surprised at you—that’s all.”

Selina sat down miserably beside Nurse and the revolt within her grew when two big boys came up from the Lower Lawn and joined the group at the other side of the summer-house. There was a lot of laughing and joking, and one of the big boys chased the little girl all round the Tennis Lawn before the whole party rose up and went out together by the south gate. Selina wondered where they lived, and then with a sudden burst of hope, whether Mother would call on them.

“Nurse, do you think Mother will call on those children’s mother, so that we can play with them?”

“I shouldn’t think so at all,” said Nurse.

“Why?”

“Because she’s not the sort of person your mother would call on.”

“What sort of people does Mother call on?”

“Never mind, Selina. And, as you’re doing nothing I think you might thread this needle for me. It’s time you learned how to thread a needle.”

§ 2

Nurse was wrong—which happened sometimes, though not often enough to do any serious damage to the order she represented. The children’s mother did

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call on Mrs. Clifford—the name into which the exciting new family materialised out of the world of dreams. She knew that they had come into the neighbourhood with a decided question-mark against them on genteel visiting lists; no one knew who they were, or what Mr. Clifford “did”—points of the highest social importance in the eighteen-nineties. But they had taken a house in a select road opposite the Gardens, and they appeared to be rather better off than most of their neighbours, if you judged by the servants they kept and the fact that Mr. Clifford always travelled first-class when he went to London. Besides, they had five children—all liable, no doubt, to coughs and colds, measles and whooping cough, as well as to more serious ailments. The doctor’s wife could not afford to ignore them, and very soon Moira and Selina were apprised by the gracious bow Nurse gave to the other children’s nurse that the barriers were down and they were free to approach the little boy and girl with all the established rites of introduction.

“Please, will you play with us?”

“Yes. What do you want to play at?”

“Oh, anything you like. How old are you?”

“I’m eight and he’s six. How old are you?”

“I’m seven and Moira’s five.”

“Oh, is her name Moira? What’s yours?”

“Selina. What’s yours?”

“Pearl”—this was a dreadful shock, but luckily Moira did not seem to realise it—“My whole name’s Pearl Dorothy Marjorie Clifford, but I’m always called Pearly. He’s called Leslie.”

“Oh, is he? And what’s the baby called?”

“She’s Bee—and then there’s Barry and Lionel, but

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they're at Mr. Poynter's"—Mr. Poynter was a sort of half-schoolmaster, half-tutor, who lived in the terrace opposite the Gardens and prepared big boys for examinations—"they're thirteen and fifteen."

"Oh . . . what time do you go to bed?"

"I don't know—any time—sometimes eight, sometimes nine; it depends on if I feel sleepy."

The children could hardly take in this statement, it was so unorthodox and surprising. That the time of bed could vary at the will of the nursery was to them something quite unheard of, and that a little girl could go to bed as late as nine seemed frankly incredible. They both stared at her with a wonder that in Selina's case was mixed with envy. She hoped Pearly would not ask them what time they went to bed. But she did.

"What time do *you* go?"

"Six," piped Moira.

Selina felt angry with her, not only for betraying their shame, but also because she did not seem aware of it.

"It isn't really six," she said hurriedly. "Sometimes it's a quarter to seven before we actually get *in* to bed."

But the little girl did not appear impressed.

"I shouldn't go to sleep if I went as early as that."

Selina hastily changed the subject.

"Do you go to school?"

The little girl didn't, any more than they did, and she and they and Leslie were soon quite happily engaged in a game of Catch round the summer-house. Selina could run quite fast and enjoyed the display of what she now felt anxiously might be her only superiority.

All the same it was delightful to have some new

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children to play with. The child population of the Gardens had dwindled of late, and now it was suddenly increased by five—that is, if you counted the two big boys and the baby. Not that Barry and Lionel were ever likely to play with them, and they both felt too old to play with Baby Bee, but they were there, all three in the background, the big boys glamorous and occasionally condescending, and the baby giving the Cliffords' nursery those points of difference which are always so attractive.

A friendship soon started—not only between Pearly and Selina but between their two families. Dr. South was called in to prescribe for Bee's teething troubles, and Nurse felt that she might safely cultivate the society of Dora, the Cliffords' nurse, whom she described to Mrs. South as a very superior person. Apart from this she did not altogether approve of the family. The children had a most unwarrantable amount of freedom, and an excessive supply of sweets and pocket-money; while the easy-going methods of their nursery were not good for Selina and Moira to contemplate. Certainly she found it impossible to forbid the more distant parts of the Gardens, with Pearly and Leslie rushing about wherever they chose. She had to agree to their going down the Steps to that mysterious Lower Lawn, and take Dora's word for it that her charges practically never tore their clothes or came to any serious harm.

To the little girls it was all very wonderful. The Gardens, now almost double in area, yielded also double of excitement and romance. It is true that Selina was always being reminded of her inferiority—of those restrictions and deprivations which, according to her scale

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of values, placed her immeasurably below the favoured child with whom she played—but there were compensations that occasionally made her forget that she went to bed at six, wore socks instead of stockings, and never had cake for tea except on Sundays.

The Clifford children were recklessly generous as well as fabulously rich. Pearly and Leslie each had a shilling a week pocket-money, and Moira and Selina, who had just stepped into an income of a penny a week, could not fail to be envious of such wealth. But neither could they fail to realize its advantages, since Pearly and Leslie were free to buy sweets not only in any quantity but of any kind they chose. Not for them the monotony of chocolate bars or the insipidity of lemon drops, but bulging bags of Hastings humbugs, liquorice all-sorts, coconut-ice and chocolate and sugar-pigs.

"Oh, Nurse would never allow us to eat that," said Selina, the first time she was offered a share in these dainties.

"What does that matter?" rejoined Pearly. "She can't see you now."

And Selina, trembling with fear and delight, devoured half a sugar-pig in the shelter of the laurustinus.

§ 3

In only one matter did Selina hold that she and Moira had a decided advantage over their new friends, and that was in the matter of fathers. She would rather wear white socks and go to bed at six all her life than exchange her own father, so tall and strong and kind and clever, for Mr. Clifford. She was not given to criticising grown-up people, but she could not help think-

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ing that if Mr. Clifford had been a little girl he would have been considered extremely naughty. Whenever she and Moira went to tea with the Cliffords they did not have it in the nursery but downstairs in the grown-up dining-room. She was therefore able to observe that Mr. Clifford not only talked with his mouth full, but found fault with what he was eating—in fact one day he called it a beastly mess, a comment which would have meant banishment from table if either Moira or Selina had uttered it. Once when Mrs. Clifford made some remark to her husband he told her to shut up, and there was an afternoon when Pearly came out into the Gardens with her face all puffy and tear-stained, because Daddy had said she was naughty and had burnt her doll—her beautiful Joyce with the pink silk dress and real kid shoes—in the kitchen fire as a punishment. This action overwhelmed the little girls with horror and loathing, and Pearly's appearance the next day clasping an even bigger and more ornately dressed doll than Joyce did not make things much better, though it seemed to have quite wiped out the dreadful memory from Pearly's mind.

Mr. Clifford himself was not more handsome than his deeds, being short and red-faced, with a large round tummy and black hairs on the backs of his hands. The little girls would have regarded him with unmitigated loathing, but for the exciting veil of mystery in which he sometimes appeared. Mr. Clifford did not seem to "do" anything for a living, and in the children's world all the fathers "did" something—nothing vulgar or commercial, but something that involved a neat office or consulting room, or a brougham and horses, or a church and rectory.

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Even Pearly and Leslie did not seem to know what their father "did."

"He's private," said Pearly in answer to Selina's question.

"In the army?" asked Moira, who did not understand these things.

"No, in the house."

This left the affair as great a mystery as ever. It was difficult to tell what Mr. Clifford's profession could be, as Pearly said he never got up till dinner-time and never went out till the evening. And yet he always seemed to have plenty of money. Mother had said that if Father did not go out to work for them they would not have any money.

Then one day the mystery was explained—or partly explained, for its solution created a whole set of minor riddles. Pearly and Leslie came dancing and shouting into the Gardens.

"We aren't coming to play this afternoon. We're all going out on ponies."

"On ponies!"

Selina was breathless with envy and awe. For as long as she could remember she had wanted a pony, and for almost as long had expected her father and mother to give her one—an expectation they had monotonously failed to satisfy. And now it seemed as if the Cliffords were to crown their superiority by being given what she had always wanted and always been denied.

"Oh, has your father given you all ponies?" she cried.

"No, of course not, stupid"—if the Cliffords possessed more than Selina they evidently expected less—"but his horse has won, and he's made a lot of money, so he's going to give us all pony-rides."

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"Then has your father got a horse?"

"No, of course not. It's only one he put his money on. It won the three-thirty and he's made quite a lot."

"But how can you make money by putting it on a horse? Could you make money by putting it on a dog—or a cat?"

"No, you silly. Only horses run races. It's like the race-game. The horse that gets in first wins a prize."

"Then where do you put the money—on its back?"

"No, the jockey sits on its back. You don't put the money anywhere."

This was baffling, but out of all the confusion the fact emerged that the Cliffords were going for a pony-ride and the Souths were not.

"The ponies are coming up from the Front," said Leslie. "Daddy's ordered one for each of us, even for Bee. If you wait down here by the gate you'll see us start."

Selina and Moira could not bear to see them start, but they waited none the less. A pony-ride was for either of them a rare and delightful experience. Only about once a year were they allowed to mount on one of the hirelings that waited all day by the parade railings, and never, never had it been for more than the half each of the shilling ride. Now the whole Clifford family was to ride out from its own front door for as long as it liked. Evidently, Mr. Clifford's way of earning money was better than Father's, no matter how inferior he himself might be.

In due course the ponies arrived, and the children, staring ruefully between the bars of the gate, saw the happy Cliffords mount and ride away in a long procession—Lionel at the head, on a pony so big that it

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was almost a horse, then Barry, then Leslie a little nervous and clutching at the reins, then Pearly, flushed and happy and more like Trimmer than ever, and last of all Baby Bee crowing and gurgling on a panniered donkey. Both the little girls were almost in tears when they came back to Nurse.

"Oh, Nurse, Nurse, *why* can't we go for a pony-ride?"

"You've only just been for a pony-ride," said Nurse, referring to a rapture three months old. "Why should you want to go all of a sudden like this?"

"The Cliffords have gone—all of them. They've had the ponies up from the Front and they've all gone out for a long ride. Pearly said Mr. Clifford put some money on a horse and is giving them all a treat. Nurse, couldn't Father put some money on a horse?"

"Yes, he could, but he'd never do such a thing."

"Why?"

"Because a gentleman like your father wouldn't think it right."

"Is it a thing gentlemen mayn't do? Oh I do wish Father was just a common man."

"Moir, how can you say such a dreadful thing? And some gentlemen do put money on horses, but your father never would. He wouldn't think it right."

"Why not, if it makes you rich?"

"It more often makes you poor," said Nurse grimly.

"But Pearly said it makes you awfully rich."

"Pearly has no business to talk to you about such things, and I don't suppose she knows anything about them, either. Little girls don't."

"But, Nurse, do tell me how you put money on a horse. Is it like putting it in the bank?"

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"No, it is not, Selina. And you're not to talk about it any more. I've told you I won't have it. That's enough."

§ 4

There was no possible doubt that this friendship with the Cliffords was bad for Moira and Selina. Nurse saw it plainly, but she also saw that they must keep on good terms with a family who proved such lucrative patients of Dr. South's. Not only had they all their fair share of coughs and colds, but Mrs. Clifford was a delicate woman and Dora had told her that a new baby was expected in November. Certainly there could be no outward breach or show of coldness, but Nurse would be glad when autumn damps made the Gardens undesirable as a playground. Moira and Selina were growing envious and rebellious—more and more of their questions took the form of "why can't we do . . . ?" or "why can't we have . . . ?"—and Selina was beginning to "show off"—she even sometimes ran after the big boy Barry, trying to attract his notice. She and, for that matter, Moira would never settle down to the ordinary, well-regulated life of properly brought-up little girls, while they were always being tantalised by this display of pocket-money and sweets and pony-rides and what not. And the lack of discipline . . . Nurse was appalled by it—the children did exactly as they liked and got nothing but a bad example from their father . . . Her only comfort was that Moira and Selina did not seem to have picked up any words; she would have known if they had, for they were always anxious to display any additions to their vocabulary.

The little girls themselves were not pleased when the

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autumn change set in, and instead of going into the Gardens every afternoon they went for walks on the Parade or in the nearer lanes. They hated going for walks, and the wrench from the Gardens was bigger than ever this year, since they left the Clifford children in possession—no one seemed to mind if *they* ran about on wet grass. Also, sometimes, as they drearily paced on each side of Nurse along the Front, they would encounter Pearly and Barry, or Leslie and Lionel, coming off the Pier or out of a bun-shop. "Hullo! we've just been to see the mutoscope" or "we've just had a splendid tuck-in"—and the privileged ones would stride away into the free distance airily forgetful of the little figures beside Nurse.

Selina suffered more than Moira, whose smart was confined to the mere deprivation of dainties and privileges. Selina suffered in her pride as well. She was humbled to the dust by the thought of herself and Moira walking on each side of Nurse, by her white socks, by her weekly penny, by her six o'clock bed-time, by all the dependencies of her little-girlhood, which Nurse seemed to love to display before the superior Cliffords.

The arrival of their baby brother set the crown on their superiority. Not that Selina would have cared at all for a baby in her own home. She did not like babies any more than was natural in a little girl of her age, and it would be hateful to have one always in the nursery, making a noise and attracting everybody's notice. Nevertheless it was a cruel blow when one day Father said:

"What do you think I've found for Mrs. Clifford—a fat baby."

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"Oh Father, why didn't you find one for us?"

"Mrs. Clifford ordered it."

"Did she? Is she paying for it, then?"

"Oh, yes, she's paying for it quite a lot."

"Then Mr. Clifford must have put some more money on a horse," said Moira.

"I hope not," said Father.

"But it makes him awfully rich. Oh Father," cried Selina passionately, "why don't you put some money on a horse and buy us a baby?"

"Oh, you don't want a baby," said Father, "think how awkward it would be for Nurse to look after three of you."

All this was quite true, but Selina could not help envying the Cliffords more than ever. In due course she and Moira were asked to tea, to see the new baby; and when he was brought in, covered with ribbons and lace and lawn, by a mysterious new nurse, and Selina heard that he was to be given the lovely name of Ernest Algernon, and was told about the toys and treats and extra pocket money that had celebrated his arrival, she almost, but not quite, made up her mind to give Trimmer a baby brother.

§ 5

Then fate, having abased Selina long enough, suddenly exalted her. Its methods might seem to err on the side of homeliness, for the change was due to nothing more distinguished than a bilious attack. Nurse always went out on Sundays and the children had tea with Father and Mother in the dining-room—tea with cake as well as jam and often five or six spoonfuls of tea in

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their milk. It was a treat, especially when glossy currant buns appeared on the table. Selina liked buns better than any other sort of cake, and this evening, owing to some diversion of her mother's eye, she was able to devour no less than five. Some hours later, in the middle of the night, she woke up feeling extremely sick, and the usual painful and humiliating consequences followed. She had to stay in bed the next morning and endure a diet of rusks and milk all the next day. You would not think that any good could come out of such an evil, but it did.

"Well," said Father, when he came in after dinner to say if she might get up. "Pearly and Leslie send their love, and Barry too."

"Oh, have you been to see them?"

"Yes, I went to have a look at the new baby, and they were all there, so I told them you were poorly."

"Did you tell them why?"

"Oh, yes."

"And what did they say?"

"They said I was to give you their love."

"Did Barry say it?"

"Yes, Barry said it, and that you were to look out for them on the Front tomorrow."

"Oh . . ."

Selina was surprised. Never even in her most ambitious moments had she expected such attention from Barry. It almost seemed as if her misadventure had exalted her in the eyes of the Cliffords. She could not think why, as in her own home being sick was regarded as rather a shameful, if occasionally inevitable, catastrophe. But she was pleased as well as surprised, and when the next day came she showed for the first time

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a certain eagerness for the afternoon's walk—an eagerness shot with anxiety, for all her hopes would be dashed if authority decided on Hollington lanes instead of the Front.

However, nothing so dreadful happened, and in due course she and Moira were on the Parade, walking sedately in their close-fitting crimson bonnets and crimson pelisses trimmed with squirrel fur. It was not long before the Cliffords ran up—Leslie, Pearly and Barry—glowing, laughing and shouting.

“Hullo, Five Buns!”

“That’s you,” interpreted Barry.

“I say,” breathed Pearly, “did you really eat five?”

“Yes, I did,” said Selina, “but I was sick afterwards.”

“Of course you were. Oh, how I did laugh! Five buns—I never thought you had it in you. Had them in you, perhaps I ought to say. Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Selina joined respectfully in the big boy’s joke.

She was trembling with excitement. Never before had she had so much notice from Barry. He now seemed quite interested in her, and instead of running off the next moment, all three Cliffords stayed and walked along the Front with Selina and Moira and Nurse. They did not talk about buns the whole time, but every now and then the subject would be reverted to: “Good old Five Buns! Well, I never did.”

Apparently, for some reason that was still a little obscure, her misfortune had made a heroine of her. For the next few weeks Barry, when he met her, always addressed her as Five Buns. It became her nickname, which she wore as proudly as any Iron Duke or Black Prince. No longer was she only a little girl, kept inferior to the Cliffords by a host of small indignities;

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she was Five Buns, a glorious adventurer, who had eaten more than any Clifford had ever eaten and done what they dared not do. Before very long she was asked to tea with them, and found that her exploit had entirely superseded the new baby in their imaginations. Only his mother noticed him when he crowed or cried; the other children were all looking and laughing at Selina—snatching away the plate of buns that, adorned with holly and mistletoe, was the central ornament of the table—asking her if she thought she could eat five Christmas cakes . . .

To have so easily wiped out the shame of being only seven years old was a piece of good fortune Selina had never reckoned on. Nurse, of course, was disapproving, and said that if she thought there was anything grand in being greedy she was very much mistaken. But Nurse had rather a soft spot for Barry. She could not help liking him and putting up with his nonsense—for of course it was only nonsense, and even Selina didn't take it as a serious encouragement to eat too much. She was content with her one exploit.

She grew, however, rather heady with it, and indulged Trimmer privately in startling gastronomical excesses. She began, too, to look down on Moira, who was upset if she ate anything with currants in it and liked babyish sponge-cake. And Pearly was, after all, only a year older than she was and Leslie was a year younger. Barry became her favourite Clifford, and his good-humoured teasing thrilled and flattered more than any junior admiration. When Christmas came he actually sent her a little box of sweets—"To Five Buns with best wishes from Barry"; she treasured the card

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after Mother had taken away the sweets to be doled out one at a time each morning.

No doubt it was inevitable that all this should come to an end; nevertheless it was cruel of fate to arrange that Selina herself should suddenly and inadvertently stop it, making her the felon of her own reputation. She and Moira had gone to tea again with the Cliffords and there was the usual joke about the buns—no one had yet grown weary of it.

"I'm going to make up a song about you, Selina," spluttered Leslie. "It begins 'Five penny buns . . .'"

"Oh, but they were halfpenny buns," said Selina.

She did not think she had done more than promote accuracy in verse, and was surprised and shocked to hear a groan go round the table.

"Only *halfpenny* buns!"—"But that's nothing—" "I could eat five halfpenny buns, and not be sick either—" "I took for granted they were penny buns."

Then Barry spoke.

"You must be a queasy little Miss to be ill after five halfpenny buns. I expect your tummy's only halfpenny size."

"Oh hush, Barry," said Mrs. Clifford in her soft, plaintive voice. "You mustn't talk like that to Selina. Now, dears, don't let's say any more about it."

And they didn't. No one mentioned the subject of buns for the rest of the evening. They seemed to have forgotten all about the famous five—dismissed them as negligible. There were actually farthing buns on the table, but nobody made a joke about them, and it wasn't on account of what Mrs. Clifford had said, because her children never took any notice of that. It was just, Selina guessed miserably, that they had lost interest in her

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exploit, because it wasn't so wonderful and tremendous as they had at first imagined. Perhaps they even thought that she had deceived them about it. They had admired her because they thought she had eaten five huge penny buns, whereas she had eaten only five little miserable halfpenny ones—a mere trifle, that would never had made her sick if she hadn't been such a little girl . . . Her five buns now took their place with her socks, her walks with Nurse, her early bedtime—badges not of honour but of inferiority and humiliation.

The rest of the evening passed sadly enough, in spite of the race game and floral lotto. Nurse came at a degradingly early hour to fetch her and Moira home, and no one said: "It's all right, Nurse—we didn't let her eat five."

§ 6

After this Selina did not meet any of the Cliffords for some time. Now and then she caught a fleeting glimpse of them on the Parade, but they were some way off and did not see her. She wondered miserably if they were avoiding her on purpose. At about the end of a fortnight this fear received unexpected confirmation—unexpected, because she did not really believe that anything so terrible could happen, it was just one of those things one imagined without really expecting. She had gone to a children's party and when she first saw Pearly and Barry there were a great many children between her and them. As the evening wore on she never seemed to be any nearer—she was always in a different "clump" or "set" from either of the Cliffords and right at the other end of the table at tea. Selina

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became convinced that they were avoiding her on purpose, and so tormenting was this conviction that she decided at all costs to prove or disprove it; so when dancing began she walked desperately up to Pearly and asked her to dance.

"No, thank you," said Pearl coldly.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to dance with you—that's why—" and Pearly turned her back.

That back became a white and silver smudge as the tears rushed into Selina's eyes. She fought them away and as an aid to self-control seized a small boy half her size and compelled him to dance with her. Nurse mercifully arrived earlier than usual, and for the first time Selina was glad to be fetched home before anybody else.

She said nothing of what had happened. Her humiliation was beyond words, and in its painful depths rankled a sense of injustice and cruelty. Even if she had misled the Cliffords she hadn't meant to do so, and they had no right to be so cruelly revenged on her. She had never said anything about what size the buns were—and it was Father who had first told the news; she had never said anything about it herself till the Cliffords came laughing and shouting Five Buns at her. If anyone was to blame it was Father; but of course he was not to blame at all. He had just said Buns and they had taken for granted they were penny ones. It was their own fault entirely.

Selina now had no desire to see any of the Cliffords again, and when one pale day in February, Nurse suggested that it was warm enough for the Gardens she protested openly.

"Oh, don't let's go there."

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"Why ever not?" asked Nurse.

Generally the return to the Gardens was the most exuberantly welcomed event of the new year.

Selina hesitated, but could think of nothing to say that would not lead to an unendurably painful subject.

"You know you like the Gardens very much," continued Nurse, "it's a beautiful warm day, and I've some sewing that must be finished, so I can't take you for a walk. I daresay there won't be any other children there, but you can bring your sweet-shop to play with."

The sweet-shop was their most cherished Christmas toy, and it would be great fun playing with it on the summer-house floor—and Nurse had said she did not think any other children would be there. That was the supreme comfort. Pearly and Leslie were doubtless running about with Barry and Lionel on the Front, and Bee would be out walking with the Nurse and baby. Anyhow there was nothing to do but submit to the inevitable, and Selina submitted, hoping for the best.

The Gardens were always rather sad and strange in winter. The empty flower-beds, the un-marked Tennis Courts, the bare branches of the trees and shrubs all gave you a sense of forlornness, a feeling that something was lost. You could not play on the grass, and you were muffled up in your winter pelisse and bonnet. The only advantage was that as there was no tennis being played, or cricket on the Lower Lawn, nor were there any flowers in the beds, that you might accidentally walk on or be tempted to pick. Nurse was not so strict as usual and allowed you to roam more freely.

Today the Gardens seemed quite deserted. An anxious survey of the two Upper Lawns showed Selina that there were no Cliffords about. She settled down

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with Moira to a quiet game in the sunshine and all was well till they grew tired of it, which happened in about an hour.

"Nurse," said Moira, "may we go and have a swing?"

"Not until I'm ready to come with you."

"When will you be ready?"

"In a minute. Go on playing with your shop."

"But I'm tired of playing with the shop. Nurse, may I go to the Flower Lawn?"

"All right. You and Selina may go to the Flower Lawn, but don't go into the swing-house till I come. And promise me not to walk on the beds or on the grass—only on the path."

The little girls promised and were allowed to wander up the broad path leading to the lawn that in summer was a glowing pattern of red, yellow, and blue, but today was just a dull design of brown on green. Selina had a vague sense of uneasiness, as if she had strayed from safety when she left the summer-house. The Cliffords might after all be in the Gardens even though she could not see them; they might suddenly come up from the Lower Lawn or out of the swing-house.

"I think I'm going back to Nurse," Selina said suddenly.

"I'm not," said Moira. "I'm going to have a swing."

"Nurse said you weren't to till she came."

"But I'm going to," said Moira.

She hurried on, her fat legs moving so fast in their white socks that Selina had almost to run to keep up with her.

"You're a very naughty girl. Nurse said you weren't to."

"But I'm going to."

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"Nurse said you weren't to till she came."

"But I'm going to."

The argument continued without much variation as far as the swing-house entrance, when Selina dropped her share of it abruptly; for there, just clambering off the swing, were Pearly and Leslie Clifford, while Barry stood close by them.

"Hullo," said Moira cheerfully, unaware of the dreadful situation.

Selina shut her eyes and prayed. O God, take them away. O God, please don't let Pearly say anything I don't like.

Pearly and Leslie stared hard and coldly at Moira and Selina.

"Hullo," repeated Moira.

Nobody else said anything, then Selina felt she simply must do something to break the silence.

"Have you been having a swing?" she asked foolishly.

"It's nothing to do with you," said Leslie rudely.

"You booby," added Pearly, and made a face very like the one she had made the first day she came into the Gardens.

"You booby!" echoed Leslie. "You booby-baby! Booby-baby!"

Selina was nearly in tears.

"How dare you speak like that?" she cried. "It wasn't my fault."

"I don't care whose fault it was," said Pearly. "You're a booby-baby all the same—you're both booby-babies—two wretched little kids who go to bed at six every night and can't eat a few little buns without being sick . . ."

This was a nightmare come to life. Even Barry,

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though as coldly aloof as the others at first, seemed to think that he must check his sister.

"Hold hard, Pearly, old girl," he said. "They're not to blame for what their father does."

"What's Father done?" asked Moira bewildered by the whole thing.

"He's done nothing," cried Selina indignantly. "It wasn't his fault, either. It was theirs."

"It wasn't!" cried Pearly. "How could it be? And my daddy says your father's a affer-afferocious old saw-bones."

"And Nurse says your father's just a common man."

"Shut up!" cried Barry. "How dare you?"

"How dare you?" cried Pearly and Leslie.

"I dare!—I dare!" shouted Selina, illustrating her words with a burst of tears.

Moira began to cry too; not that she understood what it was all about, but the situation frightened her. Pearly and Leslie had changed completely from their pleasant, usual selves into horrifying, unnatural shapes.

"Cry-baby, cry—poke your finger in your eye," mocked Pearly.

"You're booby-babies," squealed Leslie, "and your father's an afferocious old sawbones!"

Then in walked Nurse.

"What's the matter?" she asked severely. "I told you that you weren't to go into the swing-house before I came."

"Nurse, Nurse," sobbed Selina, "they're saying dreadful things about Father."

"Come away," said Nurse.

She led them out of the swing-house, and they could see by her pink face that she was very, very angry. But

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it was not till they had gone some way that they realized her anger was not for them.

"If I'd known those children were in the Gardens," she said, "I shouldn't have brought you. But I made sure they'd be rushing about the town . . . You mustn't take any notice of what they say. They're naughty, badly brought-up children. I'm surprised that they should know anything about such matters."

"What matters?" asked Selina.

"Never mind," said Nurse.

"Nurse," whined Moira, "what has Father done?"

"Nothing at all except what's right—and you're not to think of it any more."

"But Pearly said . . ."

"Never mind what Pearly said. I expect her mother told her about his having pressed for his account—and not before it was due, either."

"What's his account?"

"His bill. Mr. Clifford owes your father a lot of money."

"Oh . . . and can't he pay? And is that why they're so angry?"

"He can pay it perfectly well, and if those children were properly brought up they'd know nothing at all about it."

"Then, Nurse," gasped Selina, "it had nothing to do with my buns?"

"Your buns—what *are* you talking about?"

"I thought they were angry with Father because they thought he'd said I'd eaten five penny buns, when they were only halfpenny ones."

Nurse never even tried to understand Selina's more mysterious utterances, but this one recalled her to the

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fact that she'd been speaking rather freely, telling the children about things that are better hidden from little girls.

"That will do, Selina. I don't want to hear another word on the subject. And dry your eyes at once, both of you. I'm not going to take you across the road while you're crying."

§ 7

In spite of that terrible scene in the swing-house, Selina felt a sense of relief and lightness during the next few days. Nurse's remarks had been perplexing but they seemed to point to the fact that the Cliffords' change of front had not been entirely due to the collapse of her achievement, that there were other causes at work, which would have operated even if they had not discovered the truth about the buns.

She said nothing of what had happened to Father and Mother, for the subject was still too painful to be touched upon, but Nurse must have told Mother something, because one fine day a week or so later, she said with a smile:

"Well, Selina, you needn't be afraid to go into the Gardens this afternoon."

"Oh, Mother, why not?—did Nurse tell you?"

"She told me about the Cliffords and how very rude they were about Father. Well, that's all over now. You won't ever see them any more. They've gone."

"Gone away?"

"Yes, they've left the town. Yesterday, when the fog was so thick, the vans came to the door and moved out all their furniture without anybody knowing."

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"Why?"

"Because they didn't want anyone to see them go. They hadn't paid the rent."

"Oh . . ."

Selina was bewildered.

"Why didn't they pay the rent?" she burst out. "Mr. Clifford had a lot of money. He used to put it on horses and make himself awfully rich."

"That's just it," said Mother grimly, "he ruined himself gambling."

"Gambolling? . . . that means playing."

"Yes, playing with money. Instead of working for money he played with it, and now he's lost it all."

"Oh, how dreadful! Will they starve—will they have to beg?"

She had a vision of all the Cliffords standing in a row by the pavement, holding out their hands with match-boxes and shoe-laces.

"No, they certainly won't starve. But I'm sorry for them, all the same. When you're older, Selina, you'll realize how lucky you are to have a father who works for his living and never spends more money than he earns; even if it means that you and Moira sometimes have to go without things you want."

"Like a pony?"

"Yes, like a pony. I know Mr. Clifford gave the children lovely pony-rides, but now they've had to sneak out of the town without saying good-bye to anyone and in debt to half the tradesmen—to say nothing of what they owe Father."

"Do they owe Father a lot?"

"Quite a lot."

"Didn't they pay for the baby?"

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"They haven't paid for anything since they came here, and sometimes he's been to see them two or three times a week. That was why the children were so disagreeable to you and Moira; he had to write again about his bill, and I suppose their mother told them or they found out."

"It's us who ought to have been disagreeable to them."

"Nobody ought to be disagreeable to anybody. And now we needn't think of it any more. These aren't things that as a rule little girls know anything about, but I've told you all this, Selina, because I want you to realise . . ."

Mother's words flowed on, but Selina wasn't listening any more. Words and thoughts were drowned together in the singing of her heart.

CHAPTER TWO

O World Invisible . . .

§ I

THERE WAS A PICTURE ON THE SITTING-ROOM WALL AT Platnix Farm which for a long time both interested and perplexed the children. Unlike most of the other pictures it was plain, not coloured, so it would have been considered dull had not the subject been so fascinating. It represented a young woman lying on a sofa asleep; she was curiously dressed in long flowing skirts and a tight-fitting bodice under which her body was shaped like an hour-glass. Her hair was parted in the middle and shone like blacking, while long corkscrew curls fell over her ears. Her expression was very pious, and no wonder, for through the high window beside her couch slanted a beam of light down which glided a number of angels with hands outstretched towards her. The title only added to the atmosphere of holiness and mystery; it was faint and difficult to decipher, but as soon as she was able to read Selina spelled out—"The Belliver's Vision."

O WORLD INVISIBLE . . .

What was a Belliver? The little girls were used to meeting words they did not know, and the only effect of this one was to plunge them into entrancing speculation. A Belliver must be somebody very pious and holy and specially favoured from heaven—all those lovely angels coming through the window would not be there for just anyone. Subsidiary questions rose out of the first: What do you do to be a Belliver? or are you born it? Can anyone be a Belliver? Can I be a Belliver when I grow up?

Then Moira spoilt it all by asking Nurse.

"Nurse, can anyone be a Belliver?"

"Be a what?"

"Be a Belliver."

"What on earth's that?"

"It's the lady in the picture, the one the angels are coming in at."

Nurse went over and looked at the picture. She studied it carefully.

"That's 'The Believer's Vision'."

"The *Believer's*!" both children cried together, and Selina added: "Nurse, I'm sure it says Belliver."

"Well, come and look for yourself. B-e-l-i-e-v-e-r spells believer."

Selina looked, and Nurse was right; only there was a smudge between the "i" and its dot which accounted for her mistake. She was bitterly disappointed.

Moira, however, continued her catechism.

"What's a believer?"

"Someone who believes in God."

"Oh! . . . Does that lady believe in God?"

"Of course she does. Everyone does."

"Do I?"

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"Yes, of course you do. You know that."

"Then am I a believer?"

"Yes, dear. Don't ask so many questions."

"But, Nurse, I want to know—if I'm a believer, why don't angels come in at me?"

"Don't say 'come in at,' Moira. That isn't what they're doing."

"What are they doing then?"

"Never mind. And run upstairs, both of you, and put on your hats; we're going for a walk."

§ 2

The children knew that the subject was dismissed from conversation, but it still lingered in their thoughts, or rather in Selina's, for her interest in these matters was very much greater than Moira's. She could not remember a time when she had not liked thinking about God, and such books as *Line Upon Line* and *The Peep of Day* had always been among her favourites—their moralisings giving no offence to an imagination which regarded them as an inevitable part of literature. Even before she could read she had had a particular veneration for the letter J, and had always put it aside and cherished it whenever she was given letter-biscuits, until one day when Baa—the big girl who lived next door—ruthlessly told her that it also stood for Judas and robbed her of a very comforting devotion.

This episode of the Belliver, as she still called her in her mind, had convinced her of the desirability of a closer contact with invisible things. If the Belliver could have a vision, why couldn't Selina?—especially as she

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was only a Believer really, the same as everyone else. For several days Selina lay down on the horse-hair sofa at Platnix and firmly shut her eyes, opening them the next minute to stare anxiously at the sitting-room window behind its white lace curtains. But never, either with her eyes shut or open, did she catch a glimpse of any heavenly visitant.

She had come reluctantly to the conclusion that such things happened only to grown-ups when she was encouraged by a particularly wonderful dream. She dreamed she was in heaven. She had had a dream like this once before, but that was a very long time ago when she was only a tiny little girl. In that dream heaven had been exactly like a hop-garden, but with lovely roses climbing up the hop-poles instead of hops. There had been no God and no angels, and in fact nothing to tell her it was heaven at all, except that she had awakened thinking of it as heaven, and "My dream of heaven" had taken its place with "My dream of the red thing" and "My dream of the round mouth" in her otherwise sinister repertory of dreams.

This time the dream was much more orthodox, and heaven a white shining place above the clouds, which one trod on and sank into as one walked, but had no fear of falling through. It was crowded with angels, winged and dressed in white as in Christmas cards or the Belliver's Vision. Selina felt very happy and also a little proud of herself; she walked about looking at things, till God appeared, dressed in brown. Then the dream began to go wrong after the exasperating manner of dreams. The angels were rude to God and unkind to Selina—they pushed her off the clouds on to what looked like the back of Apple Pie, the big team

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horse at Platnix; she saw it just below her, coming up through the clouds, very dark and glossy and covered with the great leather and brass harness that he wore . . . but before she could fall on him she woke up.

She decided, after some reflection, to concentrate on the glorious beginnings of this dream and ignore its confused and unedifying end.

"Nurse," she announced while she was being dressed that morning, "last night I dreamed I was in heaven."

"That was a nice dream, dear. Stand still or I'll never get this hook in."

"Do you want to hear what I saw there?"

But Nurse was not an encourager of spiritual confidences.

"I want you to get dressed quickly—that's what I want. And you won't do that if you're talking all the time."

"Oh, Nurse, I must tell you about my dream. I saw angels, you know—lots of angels like the Belliver—the Believer, I mean."

"Will you stand still, Selina. And I think we've heard quite enough about angels lately."

"But, Nurse, you said it was a nice dream."

"I dare say it was, but a little girl like you should be thinking about helping Mother and Nurse and not so much about visions and angels."

A sudden dreadful thought darted into Selina's mind. She remembered some earlier disillusionings.

"Oh, Nurse, is it because angels aren't true?"

"Aren't true? What do you mean?"

"I mean like fairies and Father Christmas?"

"Oh no, of course they're true."

"Then why mustn't I think about them?"

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"Because it isn't healthy for a little girl like you."

"Why? Do you catch illnesses from angels?"

"No, of course not. Don't be so silly."

"Then why is it unhealthy?"

"Really, Selina, you'll drive me mad if you ask questions like this and fidget about all the time I'm dressing you. It's unhealthy because little girls weren't meant to think of things they can't see."

This was a sweeping statement; in fact it swept away all the larger and more interesting part of Selina's mental life. She felt constrained to oppose it.

"But, Nurse, I can't see Trimmer, and you don't say it's unhealthy for me to think about her."

"Trimmer's a game—she's quite different; but all that other sort of thing isn't a game, and it's unnatural for a little girl of your age to think of it so much. . . . Now say your prayers and forget all about it."

§ 3

Selina said her prayers, but she could not forget. There was always the picture of the Belliver on the wall to remind her, and even after they had left Platnix and gone home, the obsession remained. However, she was wise enough to say no more to Nurse about it, though she could not stop herself telling Moira that Trimmer often had visions of angels.

"So does Pearly," said Moira, "I mean she has visions of devils."

"That's not the same as angels."

"No, they're much nicer."

"They're not! They're horrid."

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"They aren't horrid. They have horns and tails. Baa drew some for me once, and I liked them."

This put it into Selina's head to ask Baa to draw some angels for her. But Baa refused indignantly.

"Don't be a dreadful little prig," she said.

She was angrier still when a few days later Selina asked her if her mother ever saw angels. Baa's mother was an invalid, and spent a great deal of time lying on the sofa, and it had struck Selina that perhaps that was the secret of the Belliver's power—perhaps she was an invalid, and perhaps invalids saw angels more easily than other people, and that was why Nurse said it wasn't healthy to think about them so much. But Baa repudiated such an idea.

"Of course she doesn't, you silly little kid. Why should she?"

"I only thought she might because she's an invalid."

"But invalids don't see angels. Really, Selina, you must be going barmy. I'll tell you one thing, though—drunken men see pink snakes."

"Oh! . . . where do they come from?"

"They don't come from anywhere. They're not there at all really."

"Then how do drunken men see them?"

"Oh, do shut up!"

Evidently there was a conspiracy of silence on these matters just as there was on certain others of a different nature. There also seemed a general agreement to make religion as uninteresting as was possible with such an intrinsically interesting subject. She had a new instance of this soon afterwards.

There was a little girl called Maudie Clark who sometimes came to the Markwick Gardens. She was.

only six years old, and babyish and rather dull, so neither of the children cared about her particularly. But one day early in October Selina found her in the summer-house carrying a most lovely bunch of flowers.

"Oh, Maudie!" she exclaimed in rapture, "how perfectly gorjus! Where did you get them?"

"Froggy."

"Froggy! . . ." This was something quite unbelievable. "But he never gives us flowers or lets us pick them."

"I bought them with my sixpence. It's my birthday."

"Oh . . ."

Selina was full of envy of the little girl who was so lucky as to have a birthday when the Gardens were full of late roses and dahlias and Michaelmas daisies. Her own birthday was in the winter, when you could not buy flowers for sixpence. It struck her that Maudie, if properly approached, might let her have one or two of hers.

"What are you going to do with them? Shall you put them in the nursery?"

"No, I'm taking them to Church."

"To Church! . . . Is there a flower service?"

"No, they're for Our Lord."

"What!"

"I always give Him a bunch of flowers on my birthday."

"*What!*"

Maudie was a poor dull dumb little thing, but she had just made the most stupendous utterance Selina had ever heard. Unfortunately she was either unable or unwilling to elaborate it, and Selina would have been left in complete ignorance of the circumstances and

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technique of such an offering, if at that moment Mrs. Clark had not arrived with more fluent explanations.

"Yes, dear. She always gives Him a bunch of flowers on her birthday."

"But how can she do it? Can she see Him?"—was Maudie a new kind of Belliver?

"No, she can't; but she puts them in a vase before the statue of the Sacred Heart and that's the same as if she gave it to Him Himself."

Once again Selina was bewildered.

"But what's a sacred statue of the heart? I've never seen it."

"It's a statue of Our Lord. There's one in St. Joseph's Church."

"Oh . . . I didn't know there was a St. Joseph's Church. We go to St. John's. But"—a sudden idea had rushed into her head, very different from the one that had started the conversation—"oh, Mrs. Clark, could I give a bunch of flowers to the sacred statue?"

Mrs. Clark hesitated.

"Yes, of course, if your mother will let you."

"Oh, she's sure to let me if I buy the flowers myself, and I've got twopence. Hooray! Hooray! I'll ask her directly I get home. She's sure to let me."

But Selina was unduly optimistic. Mother refused to let her do anything of the kind.

"It's not at all the sort of thing for you, Selina. I won't have you go to St. Joseph's Church."

"But Maudie goes there."

"Maudie's a Roman Catholic."

"What's that?"

"You know perfectly well, Selina. It's someone who believes the Pope's the head of the Church."

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"Well, isn't he? I always thought he was."

"Nonsense, dear. Who ever told you such a thing?"

"Nobody, but I thought it was what Guy Fawkes Day was about."

"Really, Selina," and Mother's sigh was not without justification, "you sometimes are a *very* silly little girl."

§ 4

She did not, however, entirely dismiss her daughter's yearnings from her mind. Though she would have agreed with Nurse that it was unhealthy for a little girl to think about visions and angels, she did not want, any more than Nurse, actually to discourage her religious aspirations. She was a good woman herself, and perfectly aware of the advantages of religion as a restraining force. Besides, Selina had evidently been very much excited by that unfortunate conversation with Mrs. Clark, and for some time Mother knew that she would be hankering to go into St. Joseph's Church and jealous of Maudie's activities there. The best thing to do would be to provide a counter-attraction, and Mrs. South decided to give Selina a book.

Only the other day someone had been telling her about a delightful Sunday story. The title soon came back—*City Violets*. It was Mrs. Grant who had told her about it, she remembered; her own little girl had loved the tale, and she was just Selina's age. So she went into Brooker's shop, asked for the book, looked at some pretty verses and pleasing illustrations, and decided that it was the very thing for her pious daughter. Luckily, after she had paid for it, she remembered that Moira would never forgive its bestowal unless some-

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thing was bought for her too, so she purchased peace in the nursery with some animal stories.

The two little girls were of course delighted. Presents apart from Christmas and birthdays were so rare as to be almost as exciting as Christmas and birthdays themselves. Selina was particularly pleased with Mother's choice, and Mother congratulated herself on a good idea. Alas! how little she knew!

She had glanced at the book only superficially, but even if she had read it she would probably have failed to sense its full danger. For it conformed admirably to the standards of juvenile literature then in vogue, and the religious element was entirely appropriate. It was about a "poor child," a little flower-seller, and it is remarkable that the majority of the books that found their way into the Souths' nursery were about "poor children." Selina and Moira were nurtured on *City Sparrows*, *Scamp and I*, *Froggy's Little Brother*, *Saturday's Bairn*, and other forgotten classics of the 'nineties—all staged in garrets and mean streets and written doubtless with the purpose of inflaming the charity of their small readers, whose reaction in this case was rather envy of so much freedom mixed with fear of the squalid conditions that accompanied it.

Selina took her book into a corner of the nursery and settled down to enjoy it. She looked at the pictures first. They were in a kind of sepia wash and very gracefully done; but she cared nothing about the manner—it was the matter that enthralled her. She saw the little flower-girl plying her trade at the street corner and offering her flowers to fashionable ladies and gentlemen who passed indifferently by. She turned over a few pages and saw a Figure that she admired and

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loved . . . yes, and the little girl was offering Him a bunch of violets. Unlike the ladies and gentlemen He accepted them with a smile. It was wonderful—glorious . . . better than Maudie and the sacred statue of the heart. Selina fell avidly upon the letter-press.

This told her how the little girl tried in vain to make people buy her flowers, how she was tired and cold and hungry and homeless and how at the end of a day in which she had sold nothing she huddled down in a doorway to get what sleep she could. The snow came down and covered her as she slept, and then that wonderful Figure passed by. She knew Him at once and she knew that He would not despise her flowers, so she held him out a bunch of violets. He took them and smiled and invited her to come away with Him to a beautiful land where the flowers were always in bloom, and where she would never be cold or hungry any more. She sprang up and went with Him, laughing gaily. The next day a dead child was found on a doorstep with a bunch of withered violets in her hand.

The effect of the story on Selina can hardly be described. It seemed to tug at different corners of her heart, as if it would pull it to pieces. She was miserable, joyful, shocked, upset, delighted, pitying and envying all together. This psychological ferment after various hesitations at last resolved itself in a fit of crying.

Of course Nurse wanted to know why she was crying, but Selina could not tell her, because at first she really did not know if she was crying because the little girl was dead or because she had had the double privilege of seeing a Vision and presenting It with a bunch of flowers. In the end the second reason asserted itself over the other. The little girl was a mixture of Belliver

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and Maudie Clark, and as such the object of Selina's wildest envy. "Oh, Mother! Mother!" she cried when her Mother came up to say good-night: "*Why* can't I give a bunch of flowers to the sacred statue?"

Mrs. South may be pitied as well as blamed. She herself pitied Selina and blamed the author of the book—for both she and Nurse were unshakably of the opinion that Selina was really crying because the little girl was dead.

"I'd no idea it ended like that. Why do they always make children die in books?"

"I'm sure I don't know, Ma'am. I think it's a great pity. Would you like me to fasten the last pages together with sticking plaster—the same as I did with *Little Peter*?"

"Yes, Nurse, I think that would be a very good idea. Now go to sleep, darling, and don't think any more about it."

That was what they always said—"Don't think any more about it." As if she could help what she thought about! Tonight she thought a great deal more about it before she fell asleep, and even prayed that she might dream of heaven again—"and please don't let it go wrong this time." But all she dreamed of was building sand-castles on the beach with Moira, and cook coming in with the burnt place on her arm that Selina was frightened of . . . Had no one any power over these things?

§ 5

The next day she felt urged to take Baa into her confidence—very diffidently, because she did not want to be called a dreadful little prig again.

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Baa was even more emphatic on the subject of Maudie Clark than Mother had been.

"You can't do that sort of thing, Selina. It's worshipping idols."

This was another revelation.

"Oh, is it? Does Maudie worship idols?"

"Yes, but she doesn't know any better. You do."

Selina was thoughtful a moment. Maudie had lost her glamour, or rather her glamour had changed and was now the glamour of a naked savage dancing round a tree or of the Children of Israel worshipping the golden calf in *Line Upon Line*. She certainly did not want to worship idols, but besides Maudie there was the little girl in the book . . .

She put on as casual an air as possible.

"Then if one *does* want to give a bunch of violets to God, what does one do?"

For a moment Baa was at a loss, but for a moment only.

"One doesn't want to give violets to God—at least not unless one's barmy. You say your prayers to God, but if you want to give anybody anything you give it to a person."

"I don't particularly like giving things to people."

"No, you're a horrid, mean little thing in some ways; but there's no good wanting to be pious and see visions if you don't give things away. That's hypocrisy. Look here, Selina, if you want to do something good why don't you give something to a poor person? That's much better than wanting to see visions and worshipping idols. I don't suppose you've ever given anything to a beggar in your life."

"Yes, I have! I have!"

"Oh, I know you've often given pennies to the organ-

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grinder. But they're not your own. Your mother gives them to you to throw out of the window."

"I once gave a penny that was my own."

She shuddered as she remembered the dreadful occasion. It was down on the Front, where that horrid little angel still stood. Close to the Hastings Pier there was a little bright green angel—Nurse said the sea had turned him that colour—holding an open book. In the book there was a slot for pennies and under it was written in golden letters: "He who gives to the poor he lends to the Lord". Selina would never forget how, passing there one day, soon after she had learned to read, she had insisted on stopping to spell out the message. It was the first public inscription she had ever succeeded in reading without help, and that and the gist of it so impressed her that she put her only penny into the slot.

Of course the next moment she realized what a dreadful thing she had done and burst into tears.

"Oh, Selina!" Moira cried. "You're good! You're holy!" she had never seen anyone—least of all her sister—do a thing like that before.

But Selina was not to be comforted. She wanted her penny back, and when Nurse had told her that was quite impossible, she had mourned its loss all the way home. Nurse had been excusably annoyed, and altogether the memory of her first almsdeed was not a happy one.

But now everything was different. The horrid little angel's message shone in a new light. There was a warm glow of personal service and devotion about it, mingling with the mystical gleam that still flowed over Selina's mind from the Belliver and the little flower-

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girl. "He who gives to the poor he lends to the Lord" . . . If she gave a bunch of flowers to a beggar she would really and truly be giving it to the Lord. It would be just the same as if she had seen Him in a vision, and much better than if she had put the flowers before Maudie's statue, which she now saw as a grinning idol before which Maudie and her Mother bowed down like the heathen in his blindness.

She considered the bunch of flowers to be a great improvement on Baa's penny. It brought her nearer to her ideal experience, whether objectively expressed by Maudie Clark or subjectively by the little flower-girl. She felt, however, that Baa would not appreciate the change, so she said nothing about it; nor, later on, did she tell Nurse her reason for wanting to buy a bunch of flowers.

Nurse, of course, saw nothing surprising in this wish, for Selina often spent her Saturday's penny on a bunch of primroses or violets. All she said was:

"You won't get much for a penny this time of year."

"I've got twopence."

"Oh, have you? Well, you might get something for that. I believe there are some Autumn primroses about. We'll see."

They looked first of all at the flower-sellers' stalls at the bottom of London Road, but neither Mrs. Oakes nor Mrs. Ripley had anything to sell for twopence in October. Trade was good, or perhaps Mrs. Ripley would have divided a bunch for Selina, but she knew that she could sell her chrysanthemums easily for sixpence.

"Haven't you any primroses or violets?"

"No, dear. They're very scarce just now."

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"Don't you think you could possibly let me have half a bunch of those chrysanemums?"

"No, dear—that I couldn't! I've my own little girls to think of."

"Come away, Selina," said Nurse, "we'll try the Front."

On the Front there were often wandering gipsy-women, with flowers for sale, and these were invariably cheaper than Mrs. Oakes or Mrs. Ripley with their regular customers and established pitches. Selina hoped they would meet a gipsy today and looked earnestly about her. It was not long before she saw one actually bearing down on them with a flower basket on one arm and a baby on the other.

"Buy a bunch o' flowers, kind lady, so's I can get a drop of milk for the poor little mite who's had nothing since yesterday," whined the gipsy, making the words sound as if they were all joined together. Selina looked and saw primroses in her basket.

"Oh, how much are those primroses, please?"

"Fourpence a bunch, lovey, and you'd never believe the trouble I've had to get them, walking miles and miles all over the country till I was ready to sink."

She spoke in a miserable, whining voice, but her face was sunburnt and jolly.

"I haven't got fourpence," sighed Selina.

"Threepence, then, duckie, and that's scarcely pay for my shoe-leather."

"This little girl has only got twopence," said Nurse firmly, "so there's no good your offering her anything that costs more than that."

"Couldn't you divide a bunch?" begged Selina.

"No, dearie, they ain' worth dividing—not more'n

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a dozen in each, and you'd never believe the time and trouble it's taken me to get so much as those. It's early days yet for Autumn primroses, and I was out in the woods all yesterday picking, and then had to walk home five miles from Westfield" . . .

"Westfield! Oh, did you get those primroses at Westfield? Do they come from Platnix?"

"Yes, dear, Platnix—that's the very place they come from," said the gipsy who had stolen them out of a garden at St. Leonards.

"Oh, Nurse, Nurse! I must have them!"

"You can't have anything that costs more than twopence. Come along now and don't waste any more time."

Selina was going to protest when the gipsy surprised her by suddenly winking.

"There," she said, "you can have this little lot for twopence," and she picked out a bunch that was smaller than the others.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" cried Selina gratefully, and handed over her pennies, receiving in exchange ten small-sized, almost stalkless primroses tied with cotton to some young brown ivy leaves. She felt as if the gipsy had given her a present.

"Oh, Nurse! Nurse! aren't they lovely? Think of them growing in the woods near Platnix! I wonder where they came from—perhaps they came from Flatroper's Wood. Oh, please tell me"—to the departing gipsy—"did they come from Flatroper's Wood?"

"Yes, dear—Flatroper's Wood—the very place."

Selina was in ecstasy and walked off sniffing her posy. It was not till she had gone some little way that she remembered it was not for herself. This priceless gift

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from Platnix and the woods, that seemed to carry in its fading sweetness the breath of that country she always longed for, was not her own but belonged by solemn promise to the Lord. She had bought these primroses specially to give to some poor person and it would be an act of real wickedness to keep them for herself.

The realisation and the temptation came together. When she had originally planned to buy the flowers and give them to a beggar she had never imagined that they might come from Platnix. How could she possibly bear to part with primroses that had actually grown in Flatroper's Wood? She could picture them there in the chestnut undergrowth, hidden in the fading autumn tangle of the spurge—pale yellow stars that had sometimes rewarded her eager searches when she came early to Platnix or stayed late. She would like to keep them forever, and sniff them and remember . . .

Besides, she had already done good to a poor person. The gipsy woman had said her baby had had nothing to eat since yesterday, and now she could buy it some milk with Selina's twopence. Surely that was enough. She had given twopence to the poor and could surely keep the fruits of her generosity.

But in her heart Selina knew that this was a specious argument and could be inspired only by the evil one. She had bought the flowers from the gipsy because they were cheap; if Mrs. Ripley's had been cheap she would have bought them from her. Besides the whole point of her good action was the flowers. She wanted to give a bunch of flowers to God like the little flower-girl, and this was—in default of that visionary life that

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people in pictures and books seemed to enjoy so richly—the only way she could do it. She did not want to give God twopence—the idea seemed almost impertinent—but a bunch of those flowers which were in her opinion the loveliest, most exciting things He had created.

She struggled with herself all along the Front, holding the primroses away from her, so that their scent, with its fullness of longing and memory, should not tempt her from her high purpose. If only some beggar would appear she could thrust them into his hand and be free of these misgivings. But the Hastings police had done their duty and no beggar was to be seen on that elegant promenade, where ladies and gentlemen strolled to and fro enjoying the St. Luke's summer that hung hazy over the sea.

They were on their way home and still no beggar was in sight . . . It was not till they came into London Road that Selina heard the familiar rollicking jangle that proclaimed an organ-grinder. Now an organ-grinder was not, strictly speaking, a beggar, but he was equally satisfactory as a receiver of charity—in fact more so, since all organ-grinders had a glamour in Selina's eyes. They poured forth exciting tunes into which she wove the fancies of her brain, they were romantic with the light and darkness of a foreign country, they smiled and bowed and behaved in a manner totally unlike that of the English poor. An organ-grinder came round to Denmark Road every week and played to the little girls, Mrs. South always giving them a penny to throw out of the nursery window. This was not the same man—he had a wife and baby with him and his organ made a funny sound like

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a guitar—but he would do just as well. If only Nurse would not interfere . . . But Nurse had stopped to look into Budgeon's window. Heaven was obviously making the way clear. One last assault of the tempter fell on Selina's heart and urged her to keep the primroses. But she beat it off and ran forward.

§ 6

In the Pinacoteca Gallery in Rome there is a set of little pictures representing the corporal acts of mercy, and in each one of them the person ministered to wears a halo—the poor man, the sick man and the prisoner all are haloed, because “Ye have done it unto Me.” Viewed in that spirit the walkers and shoppers in London Road might have seen Luigi Sarto, formerly of Santa Bernardina near Naples, shining with glory as he turned the handle of his organ outside Budgen's shop, drearily grinding out “Daddy wouldn't buy me a Bow-Wow” for the hundred-and-forty-first time that day.

Unfortunately Luigi himself had no idea that Selina had chosen him to represent her Saviour, just as she had chosen herself to represent the little flower-girl. He was tired and rather sick and extremely bored; he hated the damp, chill climate of the north, and he was disgusted with the illiberality of the people of Hastings who had so poorly rewarded his attempts to enliven their dull streets that he was behindhand with the rent of his organ. Little knowing his high vocation, entirely unaware of his own majestic meaning, he watched a little girl detach herself from her nurse and baby sister and run towards him with outstretched

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hand. Here was a generous child who appreciated his music, and he bent towards her with many bows and smiles, expecting to receive at least a penny, perhaps a threepenny bit. Instead he found himself clutching a very small bunch of wilting primroses.

Selina saw his face change and at the same moment Nurse called her.

"Selina, come here. What are you doing?"

"I—I was only giving something to the organ-grinder."

"What did you give him?" Nurse knew that Selina had no money.

"Nothing. Only my primroses."

"Your primroses! You silly little girl! He doesn't want your primroses."

Selina did not know what to say, for she simply could not explain the situation to Nurse.

"Look," said Nurse, "he's throwing them away."

Selina looked back over her shoulder—for by this time they had walked some yards up the road—and saw a sight that transfixed her with horror. She saw her primroses lying in the street and in the very process of being run over and squashed by Budgen's van. A cry of anguish burst from her. Nurse seized her by the arm and hurried her up the hill.

"Nurse! Nurse! Let me stop! Let me get them! If he doesn't want them I do."

"Nonsense, dear. They're all squashed and muddy by this time. It's your own fault for having given them to him. Whatever made you do it?"

"I—I—I—I . . ." stuttered Selina.

"I never heard of such a silly thing in my life. What will you be doing next, I wonder."

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Selina burst out crying.

"Oh, how could he do such a dreadful thing! Oh, how could he! I gave him my lovely p-primroses and he—he's thrown them in the street."

"He'd much rather have had the twopence they cost, if you wanted to give him anything," nagged Nurse, "but in my opinion you give quite enough to organ-grinders. Why, you've your regular one coming every week—you'll be throwing a penny out of the window to him tomorrow."

"B-but it won't be my own p-penny. I—I wanted to—to give him something of my own."

"Then why didn't you give him your twopence?"

To this there was no reply save frantic sobs. Selina wept broken-heartedly all the way up the hill, unmindful of Nurse's admonitions and the stares of passers-by.

She was still crying when they reached home and met Mother in the hall.

"Why, what on earth's the matter?"

"Really, Ma'am, Selina has no sense at all."

Mrs. South was on the whole inclined to agree with Nurse; but today there seemed to her something especially piteous about her daughter's grief—it had none of that mixture of rage or of fright which so often tempered the sympathy of her elders, but seemed to flow from some wounded place in the very depths of her heart.

"Come in here and tell me all about it."

She took Selina into the drawing-room, but it was some time before she could piece together the dreadful story of the organ-grinder and the primroses. Even when she had done so she may be excused for taking

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it at its face value and failing to realise the depths beneath.

"There's no need to be unhappy, darling. He didn't understand. He thought you were going to give him some money and then he was disappointed because it was only primroses. Everybody doesn't love flowers as much as you do."

Selina sobbed without words. Mother was only telling her what she had bitterly learned.

"Another time when you want to be kind to a poor person you should give him a penny."

"I—I—it wouldn't be the same. I—I don't want to be kind to a p-poor person; I—I want to give something to God."

"What do you mean, dear?"

Selina tried to tell her, and in time Mother understood a certain amount of that second story which lay under the first.

"And—and I wanted so much to give Him a bunch of flowers like the little flower-girl. I don't want to give it to an idol like Maudie Clark. And Baa said that if I gave it to a poor person it would be the same. But it wasn't, and oh—oh—oh I shall die."

Mother couldn't help losing patience a little.

"Really, Selina, you sometimes are quite silly. You can't expect life to be the same as it is in books, and all this thinking about dreams and visions isn't healthy. If you want to please God, what you have to do is to be a good little girl and obey Nurse and Mother and do all you can to help them."

That was just like a grown-up person. They always said you had to be good before you could be religious;

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whereas Selina's conviction was that you had to be exceptionally religious before you could possibly be good.

"But, Mother, why can't I see God like the little flower-girl?"

"Because, as I've told you, real life isn't the same as it is in stories. Real people don't see God."

"Paul did."

"Paul who?— Oh, I see what you mean. But that was in the Bible. You can't expect to be like people in the Bible. What you have to do is to be a good little girl. That's what true religion is—being good and obedient and not answering back and not hitting Moira or wanting the best of everything for yourself."

Mother went on to elaborate this theme. She was not given to preaching, but the opportunity was too good to be missed. Besides, her remarks seemed to be having an excellent effect on Selina, whose sobs and sniffs had died away, leaving her quietly listening.

But little did Mother know that her daughter's lips were sealed by the contempt and outrage that had succeeded grief in her heart. So that was how it was, was it? or rather that was what Mother was trying to make her think. Religion had really nothing to do with angels and visions and romantic personalities, but was just one of those innumerable aids to grown-up people in the suppression of small girls. And God was not the powerful and exciting Creator of the world or its loving, daring Saviour so much as a sort of heavenly Nurse or Mother sitting invisible and saying "Be good."

There was a hymn that Selina particularly hated. It began:

We are but little children weak,
Nor born in any high estate . . .

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She hated that hymn as much as she hated the horrid little angel who had robbed her of her penny. And now Mother was actually quoting it at her . . .

“Then we may stay the hasty blow,
Then we may check the angry word,
Give gentle answers back again,
And fight a battle for our Lord.”

Selina's grief burst out afresh, but this time with that mixture of rage that prevented it finding its way to Mother's heart.

“I don't want to be good!” she sobbed, “I don't want to be good!”

CHAPTER THREE

Pomfiterania and the Dirty Boy

§ I

LEARNING TO WRITE MADE MUCH MORE DIFFERENCE TO Selina than learning to read. The world of literature had not been closed to her by her personal disabilities; there had always been some obliging grown-up to read to her from *Little Folks* for almost as long as she herself would have cared to read. But writing was a different matter. It had never been easy to find a grown-up person willing at just the right moment to write down her poems and stories, with the result that several masterpieces remained unrecorded and some of them had even been forgotten. It seemed a pity, and Selina often said to herself: As soon as I can write I shall write my own stories.

It was a long time, however, before she had gone through the entire series of Progressive Copy Books from pot-hooks and hangers to the solemn transcription of Honesty is the Best Policy. As soon as she had done

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so, she asked Mother for a sheet of paper and wrote at the head of it in capital letters:

THE STOREY OF TRIMMER.

Alas! this was all the story there ever was. Nurse kept the sheet of paper and officiously handed it to Selina when she was troublesome on wet afternoons, but Selina, though her mind held a picture of Trimmer finished down to the pink rosettes on her shoes, as well as a complete encyclopædia of her doings, found it well nigh impossible to put any of this on record. One could write, but could not spell? Unfortunately not. The smallest word involved a heavy strain and by the time she had written "Trimmer was a dere litel gerl in a gowlden dres," she withdrew exhausted from the undertaking; and luckily soon afterwards the paper was lost.

Some months went by in which her pen grew more agile, and one day Nurse said:

"Why don't you write a little play for Mother's birthday?"

"You mean when we do our tableaux?"

Every year Mrs. South's birthday was celebrated with a dramatic performance.

"Yes; only this time you might do a little play instead."

Why was it to be only a little play?

"And I'm to write it?"

"Well, you often make up stories, don't you? You've plenty of time between now and Mother's birthday to write one of them down as a play."

"And shall we act it, too?"

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"Yes, of course—you and Moira. You'd better make it quite short."

Selina was not likely to make it long. Her words still ran to something like twenty a page, with the result that a penny note-book would soon be full and give her the impression that she had written a play as long as the Hastings Pantomime.

This Pantomime must inevitably be her model, since it was the only form of drama that she knew. Solemnly every year she and Moira were taken, well wrapped up, on the Hastings Pier by Father and Mother and Nurse, and established in the second or third row of the best two-shilling seats, there to sit through three hours not merely of entertainment but of interest, enlightenment and intellectual stimulation. Before they went on the Pier they would have read or had read to them the Pantomime Book, the actual words of Mr. Joe Corcoran's Annual Pantomime, printed and issued for sale in the Hastings shops. Thus Selina was familiar with the niceties of dramatic technique, not only from public observation but from private study. The writing and structure of her play did not cause her the slightest uneasiness.

Her only trouble was the subject. What should the play be about? She consulted Nurse, who suggested fairies.

This was almost insulting. Both Selina and Moira had a supreme contempt for fairies and for the females who gushed about them. Nurse did not do this as a rule, but she thought a fairy play would be pretty for Mother's birthday.

"But fairies aren't real. I don't like writing about things that aren't real."

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"Then you're unlike any other little girl I ever knew. Mabel—"referring to a legendary predecessor in her care—"wrote a sweet little story about fairies, and her Mother had it printed on the back of a Christmas card."

Selina had a bright new idea.

"Perhaps Mother will have my play printed."

"I'm afraid it will be too long for that. But, if you like, when you've written it, I'll bind it up in a pretty cover tied with ribbon."

This was a lovely plan, but unfortunately the play was as far as ever from being written and therefore from being bound. Having failed to draw inspiration from Nurse, Selina sought it from Moira. Her sister had a fine flow of ideas.

"Let's write a play about Chippy—" she started.

Chippy was the next-door cat.

"Oh . . . but if we wrote it about him he'd have to act in it, and he mightn't want to, or we mightn't be able to find him, or he might run away in the middle . . ."

"Then let's write a play about Trimmer and Pearl."

Selina knew that Trimmer and Pearl could never be combined in any play which would not end in a battle and premature bed-time.

"Oh, no—we should quarrel."

"Then let's write about Pomfiterania."

Pomfiterania was a new nursery character, such as appeared and disappeared continuously against the more constant background of Trimmer and Pearl. So far her existence was limited to a poem the two little girls had made up together.

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Pomfiterania from over the sea,
Come, come, O come, come, O come, come to me.
The dogs they may bark and the cats they may mew,
But the world is quite barren, my love, without you.

The cows yield their milk and the fields yield their corn,
And the hens yield their eggs both at night and at morn,
They all do for me the best they can do,
But the world is quite barren, my love, without you.

This was one of their most ambitious poems—almost a grown-up one. Selina's mind dallied with the idea. But —

"We don't know anything about Pomfiterania except the poem."

"Then let's write a play about God."

"Moir, you mustn't say such things. You know you mustn't say them."

Moir did sometimes say the most awful things; Selina was shocked. Nevertheless her sister's impiety had put a new thought into her head.

"I tell you what!" she cried excitedly. "Pomfiterania can be an early Christian martyr."

"What's that?"

"Oh, you know . . . someone who's killed in ancient Rome, like that little girl we read about in *Sunday Stories* last week—don't you remember—a little girl called Agnes."

"Let's write a play about a little girl called Pagnes."

"No, let her be Pomfiterania. We've got her already."

"I'd rather she was Pagnes."

"But Pagnes sounds all wrong in the poem."

"I want to act a little girl called Pagnes."

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Selina foresaw exhausting difficulties with her cast.
“Very well—you can be her—in one scene.”

“And who’ll be Pomfiterania?”

“I must, if you’re being Pagnes. I’ll be her all through, and you can be everyone else. Oh, I know exactly how it’s all to come. Nurse! Nurse!”—calling into the night nursery— “Please, will you sharpen my pencil, so I can begin now?”

§ 2

Nurse had to sharpen that pencil many times before the play was finished. Never had Selina imagined that it would be so difficult to write. Indeed, but for Nurse’s goading and promises, she would probably have given up the attempt and fallen back on the time-honoured tableaux. After all, tableaux were very exciting and much easier than plays. Last year’s had been specially successful.

Sitting at the nursery table, her pencil in her mouth, her mind went back almost regretfully to last year’s occasion. They had had their usual little Arthur pleading with Hubert for his eyes, they had had a doctor visiting a little girl in bed, a man selling balloons, a little boy blowing bubbles (like the picture on the nursery wall), and a grand tableau in three scenes called “The Mother’s Birthday,” in which Selina was the mother and Moira, mysteriously but traditionally, a policeman. (This tableau was based on a story they had read about a mother whose little girl was run over and killed on her birthday. They had had to leave out most of it because of the difficulties of presentation,

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but the mother and the policeman who broke the news to her had survived.)

The proceedings had ended according to custom with Moira's famous impersonation of the Dirty Boy in the Pears' Soap advertisement. This had originally been the inspiration of Baa, who had helped them two years ago when Moira was very little. She had dressed Selina up as the old woman, in a long skirt and shawl, and taken Moira's clothes off altogether, tying a towel round her waist as in the picture. It had seemed an altogether new and daring idea, and every year afterwards had brought down the curtain—or rather brought round the nursery screen—amidst delighted laughter and clapping from the grown-ups. Selina had been as pleased as anyone the first time, but on later occasions had felt inclined to grudge Moira her undue share of the applause. Why should she get so much clapping just for being naked? Selina felt glad that this year the Dirty Boy must inevitably be dropped out of their entertainment.

The thought encouraged her to finish the play, which otherwise she might have abandoned, owing to the drudgery of writing it. It took her altogether four weeks of inconstant labour, during which Nurse was incessantly provoking, making her write out again every page she spoilt with corrections, even cancelling one which bore no worse defilement than Selina's thumb, imperfectly washed after blackberrying. Of course a pen would have been better than a pencil, but ink was not allowed in the nursery, and the pencil was a B, producing a rich, dark script, almost as good as ink. She had thought of illustrating it, but soon found

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that if she did she would have to buy another note-book, which would unduly raise the cost of production.

At last her toils were ended, and the manuscript was handed over to Nurse, to be bound in a many-coloured piece of cardboard which had once been the lid of a cracker box. Selina felt both disturbed and delighted. This was the only one of her literary works that had ever been finished, and the experience gave her a curious sense of mingled triumph and loss. Also the beginning seemed so far back in her life that she had almost forgotten it. Between the first scene and the last ran the procession of her days from October to November—numberless gettings up and goings to bed, breakfasts, dinners, teas, lessons, punishments and Saturday's pennies, besides such seasonal adventures as the first fire in the nursery, the first lighting of the gas for tea, the substitution of walks in the town for visits to the Markwick Gardens, vague talk of Christmas presents, and even a premature carol-singer, to say nothing of the excitement of Guy Fawkes Day. All this seemed to make the play a part of her own life, as if her own life somehow was in it.

It was written with an admirable terseness. This was not due so much to the difficulty of making Moira learn and remember her part as to the effort involved in mere writing. The author had no energy left for elaboration, even for a single superfluous word. Pomfiterania's emotions must be conveyed by the very minimum of language. Not that Selina imagined her play to fall short in any degree of the usual length—it had filled the whole of a penny note-book, and seemed to her in consequence, almost ponderous. Here it is in full.

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Pomfiterania. Or Glorey in a Garret.

(Literary custom decreed the sub-title, but she was rather hazy as to why she had chosen this particular one. The spelling of the long words was, on the whole, more accurate than the short ones, as in the case of the former she had frequently appealed to Nurse, whereas in the latter she had relied on her own judgment.)

Act 1. A Garden nere Anshun Rome.

The Fairy Queen. I love Pomfiterania.

The Demmon King. I hate her, I will kill her.

Queen. You won't, I will save her.

King. Har har har har.

Song: A little bit orf the top.

Act 2. A Strete in Anshun Rome.

Pomfiterania. Oh isunt it a luvley day.

Enter a Roman Solder.

Solder. Pomfiterania I love you.

Pom. I love you to Roman solder.

Solder. Let's get married.

Song: Come in you norty bird.

Act 3. Anshun Roman Emperers Palace.

Emperor. Pomfiterania you are to stop being a Christian.

Pom. I wont.

Em. Why.

Pom. Becos I will dy rather than do annything wicked.

Em. You shall be tortured and wiped 1st.

Pom. I dont care.

Em. All rite then you see.

Song and dance.

(This was to be an intensely dramatic scene, and

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Selina's only fear was that Moira might either forget or exceed her instructions.)

Act 4. A Prizon.

Pomfiterania. Oh I am so unhappy.

Pagnes. Never mind you will sone dy and go to heaven.

Pom. Hurra Im glad.

Dance of Pomfiterania and Pagnes.

Act 5. A Streat in Anshun rome diferent to the 1st.

Pom. I am going to dy.

Roman Solder. Goodby I still love you.

Pom. So do I goodby.

Song: The Man Who broke the bank at Monty Carlo.

Act 6. A Skafold.

Pom. I am a Christian marter fairwell.

Execushioner. You may chose wether you will be hung or have yor hed cut off.

Pom. I will be hung.

He hangs her.

Pom. Oh I see a vision of angles.

Ex. She is ded Oh luvley sweat and beautiful lady I will reppent.

Dance of Execushioner.

Act 7. A Church.

1st Bishop. Shes ded she is a Christian marter like Agnes.

2nd Bishop. Shes in heaven now with the angles.

1 She was the most beautiful lady in the world.

2 And the goodest.

Boath. How we shall miss her.

Song and dance of Bishops

End

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§ 3

On the whole Selina was highly delighted with her play. It conformed perfectly to the conventions of the pantomime book, and also seemed to her intensely exciting and moving, though not so exciting and moving as it had been while it was still in her head, before she had written it down. She had also managed to introduce Pagnes without doing too much violence to the story. She thought it all excellent, and concluded her work with one or two quotations from the press, such as figured inevitably in the back pages of *Rags and Tatters* or *Froggy's Little Brother*.

"This storey is so sweet and pur and beautiful that we can hardly bare it." *The Times*.

"The orther of this storey is a Jenus." *The daly Telegraph*.

"A sweat sweat storey that brings tears to the eyes." *Little Folks*.

It was not till she had finished writing these quotations on the very last page that she realised she had forgotten to include what would nowadays be called her theme song. It was, however, too late to do anything about it, as to substitute it for one of the other songs would only spoil the page and involve its re-writing. So she decided to have it sung between the acts. After all, there was always music between the acts at the pantomime, and Miss Queenie Porter always came at least once in front of the curtain and did a skipping-rope dance. Moira could do that while she sang *Pomfiterania*; or would it be better the other way round

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—she dancing while Moira sang? Selina had never yet succeeded in skipping beyond ten, but she decided nevertheless to be the dancer . . . already she seemed to see herself dancing in spangled crimson tights like Miss Queenie Porter.

Moira must now be approached and compelled to learn the parts of the Demon King, the Roman Soldier, the Emperor, Pagnes, the Executioner and the Second Bishop. Selina could not help fearing that she would demand to be Pomfiterania, but her sister seemed quite content to be everyone else in the play except the Fairy Queen. There was only one hitch, and it was a formidable one. When Moira had heard all her parts she demanded:

“When does the Dirty Boy come in?”

“He doesn’t come in at all.”

“But he must. I’m always the Dirty Boy.”

“But you can’t be this time. It’s different.”

“If I can’t be the Dirty Boy, I shan’t act.”

This was appalling.

“Oh, Moira, don’t you understand? It’s not tableaux this time; it’s a play about Christian martyrs. The Dirty Boy is a tableau.”

“He can be a play as well.”

“No he can’t. The play’s all about Pomfiterania—and Pagnes; I put in Pagnes for you.”

“I don’t want to be Pagnes. I want to be the Dirty Boy.”

“You’re spoiling everything.”

“I don’t care. I want to be the Dirty Boy or I shan’t act.”

Selina burst into tears, and authority intervened.

“What are you quarrelling about?” asked Nurse.

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"She wants to be the Dirty Boy in my play."

"Yes, I want to be the Dirty Boy and she won't let me."

"Why won't you let her be the Dirty Boy, Selina? She's been it every year."

"But it's a play this time."

"Well, the Dirty Boy can come into a play, can't he?"

"No, no he can't. Oh, Nurse, I won't have him. I won't! I won't!"

She was sobbing loudly and frantically in the face of a truly terrible situation.

"I never heard of such a thing," said Nurse, "making such a fuss and saying 'I won't.' Why shouldn't your little sister have the part she's had every year? You're behaving like a very selfish little girl."

"But she—she'll sp-p-oil it all."

"She won't spoil it at all. You know Mother likes that tableau very much."

"But not in a p-p-play."

"I don't see that its being a play makes any difference. If I'd thought it would lead to all this trouble I shouldn't have let you write it. It's very selfish of you to take the best parts for yourself and not let your little sister have what she wants."

Selina sobbed and entreated, but Nurse was immovable. Her championship of Moira was not quite disinterested, for one of her motives was a lively sense of the Dirty Boy's usefulness in bringing the performance to an end. Once she had one of the children undressed it was easy enough to proceed to bath and bed. "Now it's time for the Dirty Boy," she used to say, and what was wont to be a battle became instead an eager co-operation.

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"You can easily put the Dirty Boy into your play—at the end."

"I can be a vision," said Moira helpfully, all good-humour now her point was gained. "She can see a vision of a Dirty Boy."

"But I want her to see a vision of angels."

"Well, she can see me instead. If you like, I can be something horrid sent by Satan to frighten her."

Selina sought despairing comfort in the idea.

"She might say—'hark! what's this horrid vision that affrights me?' It might be in the prison or on the way to execution!"

"It must be at the end," said Nurse firmly, "wherever that is. Once I've undressed Moira I don't dress her again."

"But the end's where the Bishops come."

"Well, a Bishop can see me as a vision. The play can end with a Bishop having a vision of a Dirty Boy."

It would have to, outrageous as such an end would be. In vain Selina sobbed and pleaded for the integrity of her creation. Nurse persisted in seeing her only as a selfish little girl, who would not let her sister play the part she wanted. The Dirty Boy would have to be included in the cast, or Moira would not act or Nurse be stage-manager. So there was nothing to do but give in and glean such comfort as she could from the fact that the alteration would be in the performance only, and that the play as she had written it would remain inviolate.

§ 4

After that the time passed quickly till the great day. Moira soon knew her parts, though she was inclined

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to mix them, and Selina could never rely on her not adding extraneous and ribald matter of her own. Beyond learning the words there was little to be done, as to both the children the difference between a play and a tableau lay only in speech, and the costumes were entirely in the hands of Nurse. It was Nurse who decided exactly which of their own clothes they might wear, and who provided extra adornment in the form of odd scraps of material or caps saved from crackers. This year she was specially generous, supplying two old hats of her own and a whole lace curtain, besides a crown made out of gold paper and a string or two of last year's Christmas decorations which were not quite sound enough to go up again.

Selina had by now quite forgotten her frustration in the matter of the Dirty Boy. She was full of high spirits and inflated hopes, and as time went on she grew more and more excited, till in the end she lost her head completely. The whole thing escaped beyond the trammels of the nursery, floating up into the clouds like a coloured balloon. She saw it in the reddish glow of the Hastings Pier Pantomime, with tinkling music playing all the while. Her imagination waved its wand over a few hundred misspelt words and they became a great and exciting drama, moving to laughter and tears. It waved its wand over a lace curtain and some odds and ends of coloured paper and they became gorgeous costumes covered with spangles—something like the Dance of the Flowers in *Cinderella* or the Dance of the Bow Bell Fairies in *Dick Whittington*. Hey presto! and the nursery screen was a velvet curtain and the nursery table-cloth the background of some Grand Transformation Scene, while a delighted audi-

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ence watched between the acts performances of brilliant virtuosity. She could not help seeing things like this, and she would continue so to see them till about half way through the performance, when she would wake up to find herself struggling with a dirty old lace curtain or falling over her skipping-rope, while Nurse moved back the screen, talking all the time to an audience who was only Father and Mother and to actors who were only little girls.

That time was, however, still a long way off, and meanwhile Nurse had to tell her repeatedly not to get so excited.

"If you can't keep quiet I shall have to tell Mother that we must do something else on her birthday."

"Oh, Nurse, I will keep quiet—I promise. But the play's so lovely—I think of it all the time. Oh, Nurse, do you think that some day we might act it on the Hastings Pier?"

"No, I do not," said Nurse.

"Oh, Nurse, why?"

"Because you're only a little girl, and little girls don't write plays that are acted on the pier."

"But my play might be."

"Now, Selina, I'll be sorry I let you write it if it's going to make you conceited."

"What's conceited?"

"Thinking a lot of yourself."

"But I'm not thinking of myself at all. I'm thinking of the play."

"Now, don't quibble."

"What's quibble?"

"Argue from morning till night like you're doing."

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I'm tired of it, so don't let's have any more. Come here and let me measure you for this sleeve."

Selina came, cherishing the word quibble in her heart and wondering where she could fit it into her play. She decided that it might come into Pomfiterania's speech before the Roman Emperor.

§ 5

On the day itself she heard some news that made her even more excited. Mother announced that Mrs. Rivers, a lady she knew, was coming to tea, and would like to see the play afterwards. Of course Mother was not supposed to know there was to be a play, and nearly always remembered to refer to it as "the tableaux," but Selina was too deeply thrilled by her announcement to care if she knew or not. To have a visitor come to see the play was almost as good as an audience on the Hastings Pier, and any private air the proceedings may still have worn in her mind now vanished completely.

She did not know Mrs. Rivers at all well, having done no more than shake hands with her once or twice in the drawing-room, but the promise of her presence this evening made her at once a heroic figure, and she tried to find out all she could about her from Nurse. Where did she live? Had she any children? Did she know Mrs. Craig next door? What was she giving Mother for a birthday present?

Nurse was unable to answer any of these questions, as her impression of Mrs. Rivers was even vaguer than Selina's. All she knew was that her mistress had been very much upset when she discovered that she had

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forgotten Tuesday was her birthday and had asked somebody to tea, and very much relieved, if also a little surprised, when the guest had expressed her eagerness to attend the birthday celebrations.

"I'd thought she'd be sure to suggest coming on another day when I told her what was happening, but she says she quite dotes on these things, so it will be nice for her to be there."

"Very nice indeed, Ma'am."

"I hope the play won't go on too long. I've Miss Peters coming at half-past six to fit my new bodice."

"Oh, it's sure to have ended before then. I've seen it, and it's really quite short."

Thus the performance started with everyone's hopes a little too high.

Selina could hardly drink any tea. Her eyes were perpetually straying to the other end of the room, where the screen stood ready, guarding the First Act. A garden-like effect had been produced behind it by an aspidistra borrowed from the kitchen and a vase full of coloured leaves picked on their morning's walk. To these Selina had added two sprouting acorns in acorn glasses, which in her present state of mental enlargement she saw almost as shady oaks.

When tea was over she was in agony lest Rose the parlour-maid should not have cleared it away before the audience arrived.

"Oh, do hurry, Rose. They'll be up in a moment."

"Not they," said Rose. "They're busy talking."

"Are they talking about us?"

"I don't know what they're talking about. But if you stand on the stairs you can hear their tongues going like one o'clock."

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Even from the landing Selina could hear that mutter of high-pitched voices, which, with the clink of tea-cups, meant visitors in the drawing-room. She danced up and down impatiently, till Nurse called her in, telling her that Mother would be up before she was ready unless she made haste to change her frock.

Nurse would not let her and Moira wear their best frocks, but their second best ones which had been best last year, and this year had been let down with white silk hems to match their "turned" sashes. Selina did not really mind, as they would wear them only for the solemn presentation of the book—her thoughts lay behind them with the glorious, beautiful white lace dress she would wear as the Fairy Queen.

§ 6

They were ready some time before the audience arrived—Father and Mother and Mrs. Rivers, all coming upstairs together with a great deal of talk and laughter. Father and Mrs. Rivers were to sit each side of Mother's Throne, which was the nursery rocking-chair, adorned with a crimson bow and a birthday card wishing her "Many Happy Returns of the Day." The proceedings were meant to be strictly formal, the spectators taking their places before anything was done or said. But Mrs. Rivers had evidently not been taught how to behave on such an occasion.

"So here are the little actors!" she cried. "How good of you, darlings, to let me come and see your play."

Both Moira and Selina froze a little at this form of address.

"Shake hands with Mrs. Rivers, dears," said Mother,

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and they shook with rigidly extended arms, having reason to fear that she might kiss them if they came too close.

She exclaimed a lot more at the sight of Mother's Throne, but at last all three had sat down, and the little girls came forward, holding the book of the play between them, to offer it solemnly to Mother.

"Oh how lovely!" she exclaimed. "What ever is it?"

Moira and Selina bowed low, as Nurse had taught them and withdrew behind the screen.

"Why, it's the programme!" cried Mrs. Rivers. "Oh, do let me look."

"No," said Mother, "it's the book of the play. Selina has written it herself."

"Oh, what a clever little girl! And how prettily bound it is! I haven't brought my glasses, so I'm afraid I can't read it. Perhaps Doctor South will read it and tell us who the characters are."

Selina was conscious of a deep relief when she knew the book was in her Father's hands. With his possession seemed to come a guarantee of seriousness, of due respect for her work. Peeping between the screen and the wall she could see him holding it up and scanning it intently through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Pomfiterania," he read, "Or Glorey in a Garret."

He read it so solemnly that it was quite a long time before Mrs. Rivers's laugh rang out.

"Pomfiterania! Oh, what a funny name! 'Or Glory in a Garret'—dear Mrs. South, have your little girls been slumming? Ha! Ha!"

All this talk in the auditorium was quite unorthodox, but Mrs. Rivers might perhaps be excused, as it was nearly ten minutes before the Fairy Queen and the

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Demon King were arrayed in their respective robes and had taken their places ready for Act I. Then Nurse moved away the screen.

"Oh, what are we going to see?" cried Mrs. Rivers—"a hideous slum? I'm *so excited*."

Father read out:

"Act One. A Garden near Ancient Rome."

There stood the aspidistra, the autumn leaves and the two little oaks, and there stood Selina draped in the lace curtain, with the gold crown on her head, holding in her hand the nursery gas-lighter, to which Nurse had fixed a gold paper star. Moira as the Demon King wore a penny mask from the toy shop and a black cape of Nurse's, beneath which showed the edges of a pair of pink flannel drawers.

A perfect explosion came from Mrs. Rivers.

"Oh, aren't they tooty! Aren't they twee! Is this Guy Fawkes? Oh, dear! Oh, dear! we shall be blown up. I'm fwightened."

Selina had to wait for her to subside before she could say her part, and then her voice shook a little. She suddenly felt she might forget it, even though she had written it herself. However, all went well between the Fairy Queen and the Demon King, both standing rigidly at attention and saying their words without any movement save of the lips. It was not till the time came for their song that Mrs. Rivers burst out again:

"Oh, aren't they quaint! Aren't they just too funny!"

After that it was always the same. She did nothing but laugh and talk and make a fuss. When, after the First Act, Selina came on to sing the song of Pomfiter-ania, with a corked moustache and dressed in her sleeping suit to represent a man, Mrs. Rivers held her hand-

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kerchief to her mouth and rolled to and fro in her chair. When Moira appeared in Act II as the Roman Soldier with Nurse's old black bonnet as a helmet, she cried out: "Oh look at this one! What on earth has it got on its head? Oh, my dear, I really shall die of laughing."

At first Selina was merely a little shocked and annoyed by such unseemly behaviour. It took her three full acts and the intervals between to realise that Mrs. Rivers was not only laughing, but that she was laughing *at* them. For some reason the play and the actors struck her as funny—the noble, tragic story of Pomfiterania, so laboriously written, so elaborately prepared for, was to her just something to laugh at. At first Selina could hardly believe it, but the evidence overwhelmed her before long. All the time the play was being acted the visitor talked, laughed, whispered, and made fun. She talked as if Moira and Selina were deaf and could not hear what she was saying. She pointed out all the things that Selina was now beginning to realise were weak points in the production—the time Nurse took to take away and put back the screen, the fact that the only masculine garments they possessed were their sleeping suits and a pair of pink flannel drawers, that Pomfiterania's white dress was the same as the Fairy Queen's, that the aspidistra appeared in every outdoor scene and was in fact an aspidistra, that the dancer of the skipping-rope dance had not quite mastered the art of skipping, that the waits between the acts were very much longer than the acts themselves. The result was that Selina descended to earth much earlier than usual, and then not to mere earth with its disappointments and struggles,

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but to an abasement, a frustration, a resentment that were more like the sorrows of the pit.

She had never believed that any grown-up person could be so rude and unkind, and the awful thing was that Mother was being influenced by her. Not that she was ever as bad as Mrs. Rivers, and even in her woe Selina realised that her lapses were largely due to politeness, to the fact that you could not tell a grown-up lady to shut up and behave as you could a little girl. Nevertheless it was dreadful to see Mother laughing, instead of sitting there smiling and interested. Sometimes Mrs. Rivers whispered in her ear and then Mother laughed quite loud. It was dreadful. The only comfort was that Father remained unmoved. He sat there solemnly, following the play in the book, which he never let out of his hands. Before each act he read out what it was going to be, and that was all he said.

Then suddenly Moira decided to run away with her part. Perhaps her sister had been unwise not to prepare her for the variation in the Third Act. When the Emperor had uttered his famous threat, Selina enlarged her reply.

"Don't quibble. I don't care."

Whereupon Moira profanely and outrageously countered:

"I don't care if you don't care, old nose-bag."

A justifiable titter arose from the audience at this, and encouraged Moira to further improvisations.

"You're only an old nose-bag dressed up as a martyr. I'll give you to the horses to eat, and when they've eaten you they shall all have lumps of sugar to stop them from being sick."

Nurse knew this was not in the script, and managed

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to drag round the screen before Selina had actually got hold of Moira's hair.

"Now stop fighting this moment, or you'll go straight to bed."

"Nurse, Nurse—she's awful. She's spoilt it all."

"No, no, she hasn't. The scene's ended quite well."

"It hasn't, it hasn't. We must do it over again."

"No, indeed we mustn't," said Nurse grimly, "it's already six o'clock."

§ 7

Certainly *Pomfiterania* was playing much more slowly than its author had expected, and somehow it seemed impossible to speed it up. In vain she struggled with the changes of costume and scenery—everything was maddeningly slow, except the scenes themselves, which were over in no time. It never occurred to her to leave out the business between the acts—dances and songs before the curtain were to her an integral part of the performance. But she would far rather have left these out than have shortened the play, and it was with a definite sense of betrayal that she heard Nurse say just before Act IV:

"This must be the last scene, children, before the Dirty Boy. It's long past your bed-time."

"Oh, but Nurse, it's not nearly finished."

"I can't help that, and it can quite well end here."

"No, it can't. Pomfiterania hasn't even been executed yet."

"Well, you'll have to leave that out. I'm sure everybody's had enough by this time."

"Oh, but Nurse, we can't! we really can't! The whole

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play will be spoilt—and it—it'll seem so odd and wrong if it ends here without anything more happening."

"Now, Selina, you're getting very conceited. Why should anybody notice how it ends? They've other things to think about."

Indeed, so it seemed, from the chatter on the other side of the screen, which completely drowned this backstage tragedy. Selina was almost in tears, but what could she do? She was helpless. She had been unable to keep the Dirty Boy out of her drama, and now she must endure his premature extinction of it. She was only a little girl, without authority even over the child of her own imagination . . . Pomfiterania's voice shook noticeably, and with rage as much as grief, as she delivered the last lines of the next Act—lines which properly belonged to Act VII.

"Hark! what is that hijjus vision that affrights me?"

"The next scene's the last, Ma'am," said Nurse, as she pulled round the screen.

"Dear me! how very, very sad!" laughed Mrs. Rivers.

The Dirty Boy came on and had his usual devastating success. There were screams of delight and laughter and applause. Mrs. Rivers had never seen anything so funny, she really would die of laughing—that funny, sweet, quaint little thing! Oh how tooty and how twee!—and this time her laughter was not an insult, for the Dirty Boy was meant to be funny. But the laughter was all for Moira, the applause was all for Moira, for her wit and daring, as she stood there naked, triumphant, grinning from ear to ear. . . .

Selina could bear it no longer. She had endured more than anyone could reasonably be expected to endure. Her attitude as she stood, eclipsed and ignored, beside

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the Dirty Boy, was in itself a source of provocation. She was holding him by the arm and in the other hand she had a sponge. Suddenly grinding her teeth, she rammed the sponge into Moira's victorious countenance, and savagely held it there, forcing it into the grinning mouth, flattening the superior nose, wiping from her sister's face that whole mockery of triumph which had so injured her. . . .

Pandemonium followed. Selina was pulled off by Nurse before she could do much damage, but she had made Moira's nose bleed, and at the sight of the blood she herself went off into screams that were even louder than her sister's. Mother leaped out of her Throne crying—"For shame! For shame! behave yourselves at once," and Father said, "Come, come—'let dogs delight to bark and bite,'" which was all he ever said at a quarrel; while Mrs. Rivers still laughed, but uncertainly, as if for the first time she really wasn't sure if there was anything to laugh at.

"Mrs. Rivers, I really am ashamed," said Mother. "I've never, never seen them behave like this before"—which would have been true if she had added "in front of visitors."

"They're tired—that's what it is," said Nurse. "This play has gone on much too long. Now, Selina, stop crying and come to bed at once."

It was of course taken for granted that, having been so naughty, she should go to bed before Moira, but all the sting had been taken out of the time-honoured punishment by the fact that it was already half an hour past her bed-time. She ran into the night-nursery, thankful to have escaped saying good-bye to Mrs. Rivers.

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§ 8

It really was true that she was feeling tired, and though Nurse kept on telling her to stop crying she could not do so. Moira stopped long before she did. Her nose had not bled much, and she was soon comforted; indeed, before Selina was in bed she had returned to all her former elation.

"Nurse, when I'm grown up I shall do the Dirty Boy on the Hastings Pier at the end of the Pantomime."

"Now, I told you to keep your dressing-gown fastened. I don't want you to catch cold just because Selina has to go to bed first."

Moira viewed the sniffing Selina benevolently.

"Poor old nose-bag," she murmured.

Selina's sniffs became snorts and moans.

"Moira, you're being very naughty too," cried Nurse. "You're to sit by the fire and keep on your dressing-gown till I'm ready for you. And you're not to call your sister a nose-bag—it's very silly. Nose-bags are things that horses eat out of."

"Well, Selina's a thing that horses eat out of."

"If I hear another word, Moira. . . ." It was difficult to find a sufficient threat at 7 p.m. in a nursery where bed was the only punishment. Luckily, however, Nurse had said enough and Moira subsided into private gloatings. Soon both the little girls were in bed, and then Mother came in.

She did not want Selina to go to bed unhappy, and she did not forget that it was her birthday and a privileged occasion. So after delivering a little lecture on the evils of losing your temper and being jealous, she

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gave her a kiss and her good-night sweet, and considered her comforted.

In a sense this was true; Selina no longer had that torn feeling of anger and outrage. But in her heart was still a kind of bewilderment. She watched her mother saying good-night to Moira, then from the door she called her back.

"Mother."

"What is it?"

"Can you eggsplain something?"

"I don't know, dear, but I'll try."

"Why is it that when you write a play it's different to what it was in your head, and when you act it it's more different?"

Mother hesitated.

"Well, darling, you're only a little girl. . . ."

Selina knew this gambit.

"When I'm grown up will things that I write be the same as in my head?"

"I expect so."

"But do you know for certain?"

Mother laughed.

"No, I don't, dear. Nobody does."

"Doesn't Mr. Corcoran know?"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"When he writes the Pantomime —"

"Oh, I see. . . . You'd better ask him" — then suddenly realising that she might be taken literally — "No, that was only in fun. I expect Mr. Corcoran knows exactly what he's going to say."

"Well, I know exactly what I'm going to say, but it's not the same after I've said it."

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Mrs. South thought that the conversation was getting too abstruse for bed-time.

“Well, you’re not to think of it any more, darling. You’ve had a very happy day. You’ve written Mother a lovely play, and you’ve had a splendid time acting it, and though you’ve been naughty you’ve been forgiven—so go to sleep at once.”

Selina lay down obediently, but it was some time before she found the perfect world of dreams.

CHAPTER FOUR

White Frocks and Blue Sashes

§ I

OPPOSITE THE CHILDREN'S HOUSE STOOD ONE OF A VERY different kind. The children's house was at the top of a long line sloping down the hill towards the sea, with a narrow strip of garden at the back and an area in front, hedged by dark growths of euonymus. The houses were joined together in couples, which was nice, as it meant that they could listen to Baa next door even when they could not see her. They could hear her practicing her scales, and sometimes, when circumstances were favourable—that is when she wore her boots and the nursery sewing-machine was not in action—they could hear her running up and down stairs. They would have missed this very much if they had lived in a house like Mrs. Banks's, which stood all by itself in the middle of a large garden. Nevertheless, they were given to understand that Levetleigh was as superior to Senlac Lodge as Mrs. Banks's landau, with its two bay horses and a footman, as well as a coachman on the box,

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was superior to the modest brougham in which their father went out to visit his patients.

"It's the best house in the town," Mother would say, and Mrs. Craig, Baa's mother, would add: "It's too good for a town house; it ought to be in the country."

Selina and Moira could never really think it was as nice as their own, though they accepted the judgment of their elders, and Selina had even gone so far as to select it as a possible abode for Trimmer. She abandoned the idea partly because it would somehow have been frightening to have the glittering child of her fancy living so near, and partly because Levetleigh had no area, a truly glaring deficiency.

The area of Senlac Lodge was to the little girls by far the most exciting and romantic part of it. Cooks might grumble and housemaids give notice on account of its depressing and exhausting deeps, but for Moira and Selina it had all the attraction of the sinister unknown—so much so, in fact, that on her eighth birthday Selina had chosen "having tea in the area" as her birthday treat and only very reluctantly accepted tea at the Creamery as a substitute. In Mrs. Banks's house there was no fascinating gulf between the drawing-room windows and the lawn, and in consequence of that as well as of its detachment the children could never take seriously its proclaimed advantage over Senlac Lodge.

Mrs. Banks herself did nothing to counteract the deficiencies of her dwelling. She was a mild old lady whom they occasionally saw walking on her lawn in a black dress and a white lace cap, or driving about in her carriage wearing a black bonnet and mantle covered with a crinkly stuff called crape. Nurse said

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that Mrs. Banks was wearing it for her husband who had died ten years ago. This added to her dullness, for men were inevitably more interesting than women in the children's world. Neither had she any children or grandchildren, though a grown-up woman, who looked even older than Mother, sometimes came to stay with her and was said to be her niece. A lady lived with her whom Nurse called "the companion," though her companionship seemed to be chiefly with Mrs. Banks's fat and dull pug dog, which she took out for walks every morning and afternoon, waiting while he stopped at lamp-posts, which the little girls thought highly indelicate, though at such times she fixed her gaze politely on the sky.

Altogether Mrs. Banks was the last person in the world you would expect to give a party, and both Moira and Selina were intensely surprised when one day Mother said:

"Mrs. Banks has invited you to a party at her house on Friday."

"Mrs. Banks! . . . a party!" cried Selina.

"*Can* she give a party?" asked Moira.

"Why on earth shouldn't she?"

"But she's so old, and she's got no children. Who will go to it?"

"You two and a great many others. Mrs. Craig told me this morning that Baa has been asked."

It would make a lot of difference to the party if Baa went to it. Not that either of them was ever disposed to look down on any sort of party, but they could not help thinking that this one of Mrs. Banks's would not be the nicest they had ever been to.

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"*Why* is she giving a party?" continued Moira's catechism.

"Because she's a kind old lady and very fond of children. You ought to be grateful to her."

"We are," said Selina. "But ——"

"But what?"

"Will there be crackers at it?"

"I don't know. I should think there's sure to be. Now, Selina, you're not telling me you're still afraid of crackers?"

Alas! Selina was still afraid of crackers, just as she was afraid of old houses and dark trees and tall church-towers and a whole host of other things that made her life difficult not only to herself but to those in charge of her. She had hoped that Mrs. Banks was such an old lady she might not care about crackers either, or she might not know that they were generally expected by most children at a party. Since the party was likely to be a quiet one it might as well be quiet enough to exclude crackers.

"Perhaps it will be a very plain sort of party, Mother, and they won't have crackers at tea. What time does it begin?"

"Five o'clock," said Mother, "and it goes on till eight."

"Oh . . ."

This was an unusual hour for a party to begin. Generally they began at four and went on till seven, or half-past seven. And no matter what hour they began or ended, Moira and Selina were always called for by Nurse at half-past six. This was half an hour later than their usual bed-time, as their father was a strong believer in early hours and plenty of sleep,

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but it was none the less a sad humiliation, darkening at least the last ten minutes of revelry.

"Then we shan't have very long there," said Selina. "Oh, Mother, as it doesn't begin till five, mayn't we stay till seven?"

"Yes, I've been thinking about that and talking it over with Father, and we've decided that as it's so very near—only just across the road—you may stay the whole time."

Selina did not think she could have heard aright. Her imagination could scarcely grasp the joy of a party lived through till the end—and such an end, so deep towards midnight, so long past the usual time when she sank through half-waking dreams of Trimmer into sleep. She would not go home before the other children, she would not have to say good-bye while a game of "musical chairs" or "hunt-the-slipper" was still in progress, nor go up alone with Nurse into an empty bedroom to search for her red-riding-hood among more fortunate wraps that would lie undisturbed for at least another half hour. . . . And she would for the first time have experience of that mysterious part of the day which had always hitherto been hidden beyond sleep, hours which she felt would be dark and exciting and strange and altogether different from the hours that had gone before.

"Oh Mother!" she cried, when at last her voice came. "Oh, Mother!—can we really stay? Is it really true?"

"Moirá will have to come home earlier; but Nurse can easily run across and fetch her at seven. You can stay till eight if you lie down first in the afternoon.

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After all, you're a big girl now. You were eight last week."

"And when she's nine, may she stay till nine an' when she's ten may she stay till ten, an' eleven till eleven an'—twelve-to-twelve?" gabbled Moira, who was not in the least distressed by her own earlier withdrawal. Moira was immune from her sister's easy humiliations—she did not feel the smart of early bedtime; indeed she was inclined to weary of parties and ask to go home even before the appointed hour, whereas Selina never wearied, never had enough.

§ 2

And now her only care was the eternity between Monday and Friday, which had to be lived through somehow. The daily ritual of breakfast, dinner and tea, play, baths, and walks must be performed, though drained of all its meaning by the splendour ahead. Selina now no longer expected Mrs. Banks's party to be an inferior one. On the contrary, she expected it to be the most wonderful and exciting party that had ever been given, and Mrs. Banks herself and her niece and her pug and her companion already shone in the glory of Friday's rays. When Selina went into her Mother's room to say good-morning she would stand by the window, staring in awe and rapture at Levet-leigh, which she now no longer allowed to have any structural drawbacks. Was it really true that on Friday she herself would be inside it, looking, perhaps, across the road at Senlac Lodge? How many children would be there?—thirty, forty, even fifty? . . . And would

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they have a Christmas tree? . . . Oh, please God, make Friday come.

Friday came, though at one time it seemed impossible that it ever should. Breakfast was eaten, the morning walk was taken, and after dinner the beloved, hallowed ceremonies of party-going began. There was no afternoon walk, but Moira and Selina lay down instead in their darkened nursery, presumably to sleep, actually to plan over and over again the hours ahead and savour the strange, unfamiliar appearance of the nursery with daylight peeping through the blinds and mixing with firelight on the ceiling.

At four o'clock their toilet began. In the night nursery their dresses of white spotted muslin were laid out with sky-blue sashes and white socks and shoes. Their hair was brushed till it shone like the brass on the fire-guard, their faces as well as their hands were washed with violet soap, and finally they were taken down to Mother to be inspected before their little scarlet cloaks and hoods were put on. Neither of them cared in the last what they looked like. They loved their white frocks and blue sashes because they were party clothes, and endured all the brushing and washing because they knew they would not be allowed to go to the party without it; but it never entered their heads for a moment that they looked very charming, nor would they have cared in the least if it had. Selina had once expressed a desire for a pink sash, as pink was her favourite colour, but her elders' insistence on blue had roused no protest beyond that involved in her sending Trimmer out to tea clothed from head to foot in pink satin.

On this occasion there was no need of Father's

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brougham to take them to the party, but on each side of Nurse they stepped out into a road already enchanted. Parties generally began at four, and some of the glamour of this one lay in the deeper night that surrounded it. At four o'clock the lamp-lighter had not yet come into the street, but by five all the lamps were lit, as wonderful as the few first stars that hung in the night-bloomed sky above them. No common daylight lay between Senlac Lodge and Levetleigh, but this entrancing pool of light and darkness, into which they plunged with Nurse. Selina suddenly felt her breath stop when she saw the trees of Mrs. Banks's garden hanging golden leaves over the lamp-post; but it went on again when Baa from next door came rushing up behind them, with her reefer jacket buttoned up to her throat over her blue and silver dress, waving her shoe-bag and calling: "Hullo, kids! Wait for me."

They waited, but Nurse would not let them go into the house alone with Baa. She did not trust her to brush their hair with the little pearl-backed brush that was in the bag with their shoes. Besides, Nurse wanted to see the inside of Levetleigh for herself. She kept tight hold of their hands while the maid let them in and they walked upstairs to the bedroom where everybody's wraps were laid. Nurse noticed the size of the hall and the width of the staircase and the handsome furniture and fittings of Mrs. Banks's best spare bedroom. But Selina, strangely enough, did not take in any details of her new surroundings. All her senses were lost in the general sense of Party, in an atmosphere common to every party she had been to, though perhaps intensified in this. It was a mixed impression of strange rooms and unfamiliar furniture, shining

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brass and leaping fires, many golden gas-globes and lighted candles, gleams of gay best dresses, footsteps muffled by soft carpets, a scent of polish and chrysanthemums. . . .

§ 3

Mrs. Banks was sitting in the hall with Pug on her lap, waiting to shake hands with her guests. The hall was furnished just like a drawing-room, with sofas and chairs and a thick carpet—in surprising contrast to the hall at Senlac Lodge, where the floor was covered with wax-cloth and the furniture limited to two pieces known respectively as the Hall Table and the Hall Chair. It seemed odd for Mrs. Banks to be the only giver of the party, for there to be no proud, excited children in their party frocks to share with her the honours of reception. Instead of children she was surrounded by a group of those dim creatures whom Moira and Selina accepted as a part of life's background—grown-up women who were neither young nor married, whose authority over little girls was delegated by some superior being and who seemed as anxious to please the little girls as to please the gods that commanded them. In other words, beside Mrs. Banks stood her companion in a brown silk dress, her niece in a cream lace blouse and a green velvet skirt, and her niece's friend in plum coloured taffeta with a coral necklace like pink teeth. They all smiled pleasantly, and the little girls greeted them politely though without much interest.

When all the guests had arrived it was the duty of these demi-urges to shepherd them into the dining-

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room for tea. Selina's heart began to beat quickly, as she wondered if there would be any crackers. Up till this moment she had not had time to think about crackers, but now she suddenly and painfully realised that they would almost certainly be there, that a party of such magnificence could never be without them. She was afraid of the bang the crackers made and had in the past wasted much energy in trying to persuade other children to unwrap instead of pulling them. As she pressed in at the dining-room door, she rose on her toes and peered anxiously over the hair-ribbons in front of her towards the table. Of course she had been right; there were the crackers—stacks of them, lying beside the plates and piled in heaps round the central decoration of flowers. She would have to face the inevitable, unless this time she really could impose her will upon the table and persuade a general unwrapping, or unless she did as she had sometimes done, though always reluctantly, and demanded to be taken from the room while the crackers were pulled.

There was, however, an appreciable time before this problem should actually arise, and she was able to dismiss it from her mind quite easily. Never in all her life had she seen such a wonderful tea. Selina and Moira were greedy, as children of a later, more luxuriously fed generation are not as a rule. The word greedy, however, should be gallicised as *gourmet* rather than as *gourmand*. Selina's eyes swept indifferently over the piles of bread and butter, sandwiches, rock-buns, and sponge-cakes, to fix themselves in reverent contemplation on the iced Christmas cakes, the jellies, creams, tarts and charlotte-russes beyond them. Her attitude towards those was much like that of a cat

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towards cream—she was not moved by hunger so much as by a kind of romantic excitement; her mouth did not water, but her eyes shone and her pulses beat while her head swam a little. Never had she seen such beautiful, exciting shapes except in picture-books and dreams.

Her raptures were interrupted by one of the dim women suddenly saying grace. This was an innovation at parties. Grace was always punctually said at the nursery table, and inevitably associated with bread and butter, milk, and rice-pudding; it seemed queer and almost blasphemous to say “for what we are about to receive” over this galaxy of many-coloured delights. Certainly there was no danger of not being “truly thankful.”

With her head and her heart so full, it was at least a minute before she had time to notice either of her neighbours. Then she found that on her left was a member of the genus Big Boy—a terrifying, glamorous figure with his thick, smooth hair and Eton suit. She did not suppose he would take any notice of her at all, and her heart sank a little. Her right-hand neighbour was scarcely more promising, being a little girl some two years older than herself, who was nevertheless still called Baby. This name, which would have weighed down either Moira or Selina to the depths of abasement, seemed in her case to have lost all its degrading associations. Indeed, anything more unbaby-like than her sharp little face it would be hard to imagine. Selina had always been slightly in awe of her, for her tongue was as sharp as her face and had pricked the shining bubble of more than one of her dreams. She could not help feeling that she was un-

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lucky to have two such neighbours. If only she could sit next to Baa . . . But Baa was far away with some other big girls at the end of the table, though when she saw Selina gazing at her through the central range of jellies, she grinned encouragingly.

One comfort was that neither Baby nor the big boy could really spoil her tea. As soon as she found out there was to be no rule of "bread and butter first" and saw a pink cake on the plate before her, she forgot them both in a pleasure that at her time of life was superior to the pleasure of good company. Moreover, the lady who was handing round the tea-cups never thought of Selina drinking milk, and gave her a real, dark, grown-up cup of tea. It was a pity that she could not keep this triumph to herself.

"Look," she said to Baby. "I've got real tea."

"So has everybody," said Baby, "except Moira. She's just asked for milk."

"Has she? How silly of her!"—Selina felt ashamed of Moira—"She's going home at seven," she added. "I'm staying till eight."

"So's everybody. The party ends at eight."

"But usually we have to go home at half-past six. This time Mother said I was old enough to stay till eight."

"It's very rude to go away from a party before the end."

This was an entirely new aspect of a familiar woe, and Selina found herself resenting it.

"It isn't rude or Mother wouldn't make us do it."

"My mother says it's very rude to leave a party before the end."

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"It would be ruder still if I went to sleep, as I prob'ly should if I stayed up late."

"Will you go to sleep tonight?"

"No, I shan't."

"Then you wouldn't have other nights."

"But I'm older now than I was then. I'm eight. Moira's only six—that's why she has to go away early. *She* might go to sleep."

"It's very rude to leave a party before the end."

Selina turned from her in anger and outrage. She wanted to slap her face and tear off her locket, but she had enough sense to foretell the result of such behaviour and just—only just—enough self-command to avoid it. The next moment the outrage was forgotten and the struggle within her died, as her other neighbour surprisingly spoke.

The big boy turned to her a pleasant, smiling face and asked if she would like some chocolate blanc-mange.

Selina said, "Yes, please," and then the big boy talked to her quite a lot. He asked her how old she was and if she went to school—a truly flattering question to one who has just struggled into Part II of the Royal Reader. Before long Selina was chattering gaily and wondering how ever she could have thought he wouldn't speak to her. He told her all about the Hastings Pier Pantomime, which she and Moira were not seeing that year, as it was Robinson Crusoe, and they never went to see Robinson Crusoe because of the bangs in it. The big boy told her the story of the pantomime, and described the characters and repeated the jokes.

"It's a pity you can't see it," he said, "but then of

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course there *are* bangs. To tell you the truth, that's the part I like best—my favourite bit is when the Cannibal King puts gunpowder in the pot instead of pepper and gets blown up. He hangs from the ceiling in ribbons—I can't think how they do it. But of course if you don't like bangs you wouldn't like that."

Selina found him so kind and understanding on the subject of bangs that she took this opportunity to suggest that he and she should unwrap their crackers instead of pulling them. Already the clink of tea-cups was dying down, the cakes were no longer in heaps but lay scattered in lonely survival, the jellies sagged and nodded over the gashes in their sides, and hands were stretching over the empty plates to the crackers beyond them.

"It's really much better to unwrap them," she said nervously, "as then the thing inside doesn't get lost. Quite often if you pull them the thing inside falls out."

"Yes, I see . . ." said the big boy; then suddenly he smiled—"but wouldn't it be more fun if you pulled yours?"

"No-oo—I don't think so."

"I think it would. You'd be awfully pleased once you'd done it. Now, come on—try!"

Still smiling in that attractive way he held out a cracker.

"Come on—try! It isn't really a big bang—only a pop."

Already those pops were beginning to fly round the table, and Selina's hands were at her ears, while in her chest was a queer shaking feeling. All of her seemed to be in torment except her eyes, which were fixed on

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the kind smile of the kind, condescending big boy, who had been so wonderful as to notice her. . . . She would be wonderful too . . . in a second her little hand shot out and she grasped the cracker . . . she scarcely heard the bang in the loud beating of her heart.

"Good. That's splendid!" said the big boy, and then suddenly another voice broke in: "Well done, kid!"

She turned round and saw Baa standing behind her.

"Oh, Baa," she cried exultingly. "I've pulled a cracker!"

"So I see. It was clever of you, Fergus. Now perhaps she won't be such a little donkey any more. Pull one with me, Selina."

Selina, still giddy with her triumph, pulled one with her, but this was not the same as the first. The bang sounded quite loud and terrifying and a kind of shiver went all up her arm. She turned away from the table, in case Baby should ask her to pull a cracker, and went up to one of the dim ladies who was standing by.

"Please, I've finished my tea. May I go out into the hall?"

"Yes, dear, certainly. I'm trying to get people to go. The magic lantern's ready."

"Oh, is there to be a magic lantern?"

"Yes, Mrs. Clarence Griffin's entertainment. If you'll come out now you'll get a good seat."

Selina had never heard of Mrs. Clarence Griffin, but she gladly followed the dim lady out into the hall, and as a reward for having given way to panic was able to select the chair she liked best out of nearly eighty.

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§ 4

During tea the hall had been made ready for a magic-lantern display. The lights were still on, but the sofas and chairs were arranged in rows facing a white screen—no common sheet pinned up against the wall, as was usual at most parties and in her own home, but a real, proper magic-lantern screen, mounted on a sort of frame. From her position in the middle of the front row, Selina prepared to enjoy herself.

The fusillade in the dining-room died down and the children came trooping in. Soon all was chatter and scramble, with cries of "sit next me." . . . Selina, being in front, found herself surrounded mostly by little ones, but she did not really mind whom she sat next, as her entire interest was for the magic lantern and the wonders it should display. Some kind-hearted person put Moira beside her, thinking the little sisters would like to be together; but though this time last year to sit together would have been ordinary and inevitable, just as it had been ordinary and inevitable to play together and sleep together, during the last few months a gap had appeared between them. As the years passed that gap would grow still wider, and then it would imperceptibly narrow again, till in the end it ceased to exist; but at present Selina was just beginning to see Moira as one of the little ones and to feel herself standing alone on the perilous fringes of a more mature society.

Moira began telling her all she had had for tea and how she had lost the cap out of her cracker, but Selina scarcely listened, so intently was she waiting for the

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lights to go down and the performance to begin. Then somebody said "Sssh" very loud, and two servants with long white cap-streamers lowered the gas, while a lady stepped forward beside the screen.

Up till now Selina had vaguely expected Mrs. Banks to show the magic lantern slides herself, just as Father did at home and other children's parents did at their parties. She was used to seeing slides come in upside down, to be changed to right way up among shouts of laughter. But this evening it was all to be different and superior. The lantern was in the care of an unknown gentleman with curly hair and a long moustache, and no slide came in upside down, the audience having to look elsewhere for comic relief. When the slides were to be changed, the lady in front of the screen hit the ground with her pointer, and then they didn't just follow one another in the ordinary way, but faded marvellously together, so that each picture seemed to appear out of the one that had come before it.

The lady, Selina supposed, was Mrs. Clarence Griffin. She was not sure if she really liked her very much or if she wouldn't rather have had no talking while the slides were being shown. She spoke in rather a curious voice, as if she had something in her mouth. At first Selina thought that she couldn't have finished her tea before it was time to begin, but as by the end of the performance the obstruction was still there, she was forced to the conclusion that it couldn't be anything eatable—unless, indeed, it was an extra large and enduring bullseye.

Mrs. Clarence Griffin began by telling the story of the Babes in the Wood. The slides were given as

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illustrations and had that glorious brighter-than-life colouring which was one of the attractions of a magic-lantern in Selina's eyes. But the story was dull compared with the version of it presented by the Hastings Pier Company in their Christmas Pantomime. The Wicked Uncle wasn't a bit funny, nor were the two Ruffians—how they had laughed last year at the one who was always asking: "Where's me pore little 'at?"—and Robin Hood and Maid Marion and Dame Trot simply didn't appear at all. Everybody listened in polite boredom, except the very little ones who had not seen the Pantomime.

Then came a set of slides about exploring in Central Africa; again a dull story—at least so it appeared to Selina, who didn't care for stories about grown-up people—but with lovely slides showing beautiful flowers and birds and a very blue sky, besides slides of lions and elephants and natives, which the boys liked. There was a lot about Missionaries, too, which was uninteresting though doubtless inevitable. This story gave place to one about a poor little girl living in a garret. Her mother died and she went out to beg for food; people were unkind to her, but in the end a rich lady adopted her, and she was taken out beautifully dressed (though in clothes which children never wore now), with a purse full of pennies to give to any poor children she met. Then Mrs. Clarence Griffin recited a poem about John Gilpin, which was funny and pleased the boys, though Selina did not like it much, as it was all about a silly bald-headed man and she did not like bald-headed men.

The last item was a story called "Little Alfred: or The Fisherman's Son." The title appeared written on

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a scroll held up by two angels, and Selina hoped there would be a lot about angels in the story, but there wasn't. It was all about a little boy whose father went to sea, fishing, and who wanted very much to go too. His father promised him he should go on his birthday, but when his birthday came his little sister Adela was ill, and his mother asked him to stay at home and help nurse her. Selina ardently hoped he would refuse, but, needless to say, he did not. He stayed at home and sat by Adela's bedside all night reading to her while his mother lay down for a little rest. Then suddenly he noticed a pink light in the room—they saw it on the screen, coming in at the window. A ship must be on fire at sea—his father's ship, of course. He went down on his knees to pray.

Then the scene changed and a truly dreadful one appeared. A ship was on the sea, and out of one end of it came a horrible pink fan, which Selina knew was the fire. The fan was pink at the edges, but at the centre, where it joined the ship, it was yellow. Somehow or other the sight of this pink fan and the thought of the fire it represented filled her with a bottomless terror. She did not want to scream, but sat quite still in her seat, feeling as if cold water was being poured over her shoulders and down her spine, while in her stomach was a qualm of disgust and sickness. She began to pray as desperately as the little boy in the story—"Oh, God, please take it away. I can't bear it—please take it away." But it seemed ages before the picture faded into one the lifeboat gallantly coming to the rescue, and during those ages Selina knew that it was being surely and inevitably printed on the darkness behind her eyes, so that whenever she shut them

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to go to sleep she would see it, and in her dreams it would appear.

The fisherman was rescued and restored to his family, including a revived Adela. Then a strange thing happened—a hymn appeared printed on the next slide, and the children were told to stand up and sing it. Most of the words proved beyond Selina's reading powers, but the hymn itself was familiar:

Safe in my Saviour's loving arms . . .

It was all because of the fisherman and his deliverance, but never had the consolations of religion seemed more ill-timed. Indeed the only result in Selina's mind was that the hymn itself became imbued with the same terror as the picture, so that she would never for the rest of her life be able to sing it without a dim sense of shock and crawling fear.

At last it was over, the lights went up, and she felt a little ease.

§ 5

"Now, children, this way please."

Where were they going now? A door opened that they had never been through before, and they entered a large room lit up by the hundreds of candles that blazed on the biggest Christmas tree Selina had seen in her life. Her heart beat wildly with delight, and immediately the pink fan disappeared—not alas! forever, but for as long as this ecstasy should last. She had not expected a Christmas tree to follow the magic-lantern; it was the first time in her experience that this had happened. At the parties she had been to up

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till now there had often been one or the other of these treats, but never before had there been both. Mrs. Banks's party was certainly the most exciting and wonderful party she had ever known, and it had quite a long time to go yet—the clock on the mantelpiece said only half-past six. At this hour which was normally the hour of misery, wrapping-up and good-bye, she still stood free and unfetched at the very apex of her enjoyment. She felt that she must be the happiest little girl in the world.

At first the tree was only a mass of glittering lights, a formless dazzle of colour; but after a while she began to notice details. One was that the presents, instead of being wrapped up in parcels, hung unveiled from the boughs. Some artist had doubted the ornamental value of brown paper and had hung the tree instead with a variety of brilliant toys. Balls, tops, dolls, engines, horses, little chairs and tables, tea-sets, gay picture books and puzzles all joined with the many-coloured candles and rainbow ornaments of spun glass to adorn Santa Claus's altar and excite the devotion of his clients. Selina thought this a great improvement on the usual method, and, oblivious of everybody else, began to prowls round the tree, for the purpose of discovering exactly what it offered and to decide which present she hoped would be hers.

Her choice soon fell on a doll's toilet-set—a shiny piece of cardboard to which were attached by big stitches a doll's brush and comb and looking-glass in gold (or as good as gold), with a pearl necklace and two pearl bracelets and a tiny set of pearl earrings. There were pearls on the backs of the brush and mirror too, and the pearls were large and lustrous and

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delicately pink. She did not think she had ever seen anything so beautiful, so complete in its smallness, richness and perfection, and with a faint shining quality, a sense of light, that almost made her want to cry. She did not care for dolls, but she viewed this treasure as self-existing, apart from any doll's use. "Oh, I do hope that's for me," she murmured under her breath.

"Now, Selina, don't stand goggling at the presents, but get out of the way"—Baa's voice broke into her dream—"they'll see what you want if you stare like that."

"But that's what I want them to see," said Selina. However, she stepped back from the tree, though she took care to stand opposite the toilet-set, from which she never once removed her eyes. No names were written on the presents—she had discovered that in the course of her inspection—but the dim ladies who were to distribute them had lists in their hands and Selina would at that moment have given almost everything she possessed to see what was on them.

There was much to happen first, however, before the distribution took place. First of all Mrs. Clarence Griffin came and stood by the tree and recited something—Selina had never been to a party where the grown-ups had been given their heads to the same extent. Then a little girl in a pink frock created a diversion by setting her hair alight with one of the candles. It was promptly put out with a wet sponge kept in readiness for such catastrophes, but there was a strong smell of singeing, and Selina had a moment of real terror—not because of any association of the incident with the pink fan, to which it bore no rela-

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tion at all in her mind—but because she thought that if the little girl was burnt to death the dim ladies might forget to give away the toys.

However, the little girl was not burnt to death, nor indeed seemed any the worse for her mishap; and at last the preliminaries, whether deliberate or accidental, were at an end and the chief ceremony of the evening began. Mrs. Banks's companion stood by the tree and called out the names, while the niece and the niece's friend cut the presents off the branches and handed them to the children. Selina waited for her name to come, standing with burning eyes fixed upon her heart's desire. As each moment went by she seemed to want that doll's toilet-set more. Indeed "want" is a feeble word to express the emotion that racked her. She longed for that doll's set, she yearned for it, she lusted after it. And all the time the ladies went on reading out names that were not hers . . . it was some little while before her anxiety shifted from her name to the beloved object itself and the fear that it might be given to someone else.

The niece's friend came and stood near her, and it struck her that she might help things by a personal appeal. She went up to her and asked:

"Do you see that doll's toilet-set over there? Do you think I might have that? I want it so much."

The niece's friend smiled vaguely and said something she could not quite hear. Then she went over and spoke to the companion, and they both murmured together before going on with the distribution. Meanwhile Selina continued to point at the toilet-set—not in any vulgar way forbidden by Nurse, but as a sport-

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ing dog points, her whole body concentrated in one tense and expectant indication.

At last her name was called. Trembling and hardly able to see she stepped forward and received—a doll's *cooking*-set.

At first she thought she was going to cry. In her hand was nothing but a collection of pots and pans, which she had never found particularly interesting. But she knew she must not cry at a party—to do so would be a hideous and unforgettable disgrace. She blinked away her tears just in time to see a little girl in a white frock and a yellow sash being given her toilet-set—she would always think of it as hers.

This was really too much and a tear forced its way over her eyelashes. Baa, who was standing next her, saw it on her cheek and stooped down hurriedly.

“What on earth are you crying for, Selina?”

“I—I d-don't like my p-p-present.”

“Well, don't *cry* about it. You really mustn't. Let's see what it is.”

Selina handed her the despised cooking-set.

“Well, I don't see anything wrong with that. Think of the things you'll be able to make with it—I'll come in one day and show you how. And, look here, if you're going to cry, you'd better stand behind me so that nobody will see you.”

But Selina was not going to cry. With a violent effort she recovered herself and stood waiting for the present-giving to end. The tree was beginning to look quite bare without its many-coloured gifts. Moira went up and received a black donkey with panniers, then a little boy was given a trumpet. And so on till the

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end. Meanwhile a desperate resolve had formed itself in Selina's heart.

She had never thought of such a thing in her life, and was even now a little horrified at herself for thinking of it. But she wanted that toilet-set so much that plans and thoughts about it seemed to come into her head of their own accord. The room looked more crowded than ever, as the children, released from the ceremony of present-giving, moved about showing their toys to one another. . . . "Look what I've got!—look what I've got!" Under cover of it all, Selina went round to where stood the little girl who had her toilet-set.

"Hullo," she said, "do you like your present?"

"Yes," said the little girl, "I do."

"You wouldn't rather have this instead?"—holding out her own.

"No, I don't think I would."

"But I'll give it to you, if you like, in exchange for yours. It's very nice really—you can cook things in it."

"I don't know how to cook."

"Oh, Baa will show you," promised Selina rashly. "She said she'd show me, and I'm sure she'll show you."

"But I don't want a cooking-set."

"Nor do I. I'd much rather have the toilet-set. That's why I'm wanting to exchange. Oh, please let me have it in exchange for this."

The little girl looked at the cooking-set and shook her head. Selina grew desperate. What was she to do if the little girl wouldn't exchange? "O God," she prayed silently, "*make* her give it to me."

The prayer put a new thought into her head. There

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had been a lot of religion here this evening—more than she was accustomed to at parties. There had been grace before tea as well as that hymn on the magic lantern. Mrs. Banks must be very religious; perhaps the little girl was religious too. This thought, with a certain recollection of some of her mother's methods, inspired her next remark.

"Don't you think God would want you to give me that toilet-set?"

The little girl was surprised. She was not used to such a mode of address, at least not at parties. Perhaps it was surprise, perhaps it was the consuming urgency of Selina's desire, perhaps it was her own decision that after all the cooking-set was the better present of the two, that made her change her mind and say:

"All right, you can have it, and I'll take yours."

The exchange was made, and Selina soared straightway from the depths of loss and longing to the heights of ecstatic possession. Off she went hugging the toilet-set to her bosom, and only just remembering that she must not show it to anybody, in case by some cruel interference of grown-ups, the exchange should be considered null and void and her treasure reft from her. She did not dare put it down, for fear that its former owner might repent and claim it, so for the next half hour at least she clutched it firmly in one hand whatever her other was doing. Luckily, the back of the cardboard mounting was very much the same in both cases, so that neither Baa nor any dim lady was likely to notice what had happened—if indeed they should ever find leisure to do so. Soon Baa went off with the older girls and boys into another room where there was dancing, and Selina stayed behind

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for games round the extinguished and dismantled Christmas tree.

§ 6

The magic hour had come which was not a part of any day or night as she knew it. The hands of the clock pointed to half-past seven, a time hitherto associated with the morning, with being bathed and dressed, with the early sunshine in the nursery and the smell of breakfast in the house. And here she was at a party, in the night, at a time when she was usually asleep and always in bed. She felt that some terrific emotion should mark the occasion, but instead there was a swimming sense, a kind of intoxication, so that the lights in the gas-globes and their reflections in the polished floor, the warm, dark colours of the curtains and furniture, and the light, bright colours of the children's dresses, all fused to make a giddiness around her, a swaying enchantment.

A piano tinkled in her ears, and in her nostrils was a vague, warm scent of fire and chrysanthemums, silks and scented soap. The children were dancing now and Selina was dancing, first with the little girl in pink whose hair had caught fire, then with the supercilious Baby, then with a little boy. Moira had long ago gone home, clutching her panniered donkey and babbling to Nurse. The sensation of being alone at a party—one alone instead of one of two—was added to the evening's delicious draught of new experience. She grew rather heady with it, laughed and screamed and ran about, sliding on the polished floor. Her sash became untied and one of the ladies tied it again for

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her and told her not to run about so much or she would get tired.

Then when the hands of the clock were just short of eight they were all shepherded back into the dining-room, where they found the big boys and girls enjoying lemonade and ices—supper, in fact. It seemed almost too good to be true—lemonade and ices instead of milk and biscuits; and there were crystallised fruits too and sugar biscuits and thin-cut sandwiches of shrimp-paste and minced chicken—and no crackers. Selina was able to enjoy a meal without any anxious thoughts for its conclusion.

While they all talked and ate the maid in the long white streamers kept on coming to the door and announcing: "Mrs. Grant's carriage . . . the cab has come for Mrs. Roseberry's children . . . someone has come for Master Johnny McCartney. . . . Mrs. Topping's cab is here"—and in time she said: "Mrs. South's nurse has come for Miss Selina."

Selina had to go. She said good-bye to Baa and good-bye to Fergus and good-bye to Baby, who said "I hope you won't fall asleep on the way home"—and good-bye to the little girl in pink (the little girl who had given her the toilet-set she avoided sedulously) and good-bye to Mrs. Banks—though this was not her own idea so much as the suggestion of one of the dim ladies. Then she joined the stream of children and nurses on their way upstairs. In the bedroom there was a scuffle for cloaks.

"Well, I hope you enjoyed yourself, dear," said Nurse, as she fastened Selina's under her chin.

"Oh, yes, Nurse; it was lovely."

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"And what present did you get off the tree—Moirá didn't seem to know."

"I'll show it to you when we get home. It's under my cloak now."

Nurse did not press her any further, and they went downstairs. As they passed the dining-room she could see some of the bigger ones still eating ices—Baa and Fergus among them. Lucky Baa!—doubtless equally lucky Fergus—who was old enough to go by herself to parties and could stay if she liked till everyone else was gone.

They were out in the dark, lamplit road. Nurse held her hand tightly as they crossed it.

"Now you must go straight to bed the minute we get home and sleep like a top till tomorrow morning," said Nurse, little knowing what was in store for her when the pink fan should reappear.

"Oh, but mayn't I say good-night to Father and Mother first?"

"Of course you may, but don't stay long."

"I don't think I want to. Nurse, I actcherly think I really *want* to go to bed."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it."

They went into the house. How strange it felt at this time—the time when on other nights she was always in bed! Rose was clearing away late dinner—it seemed odd to see the plates on the tray just as if it was ordinary dinner-time, and yet with the gas lighted and darkness outside the hall-windows. How strange the house felt!—and how safe! With a burst of ecstatic relief Selina realised that her treasure was now really her own. Nobody now would make her give it back to the little girl—and, besides, she didn't know who

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she was, not even her name. Baa could not make her give it back if ever she should come in to show her how to use the cooking-set, and it was quite possible that she might forget to come. No, the toilet-set was now hers, absolutely and completely hers—hers, hers, hers forever. She need not hide it any longer. She snatched it from under her cloak.

“Nurse! Nurse! look!”

But before Nurse had time to look, she was at the drawing-room door, had pulled it open and run in, up to the fireside where her father and mother were sitting, smiling and surprised at her eager return.

“Father!—Mother!—look!”—tumbling in an excited heap at their feet—“look! look! Oh, isn’t it beautiful! Oh, isn’t it perfectly lovely!”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Dreadful Blow

§ 1

“Hip! Hip! Hip! Hooray!
Three cheers for the Princess May!”

carolled Moira reedily, and Selina gave the correct response:

“Hip! Hip! Hip! Hooray!
Four cheers for myself!”

It was actually more than a week since Princess May's marriage to the Duke of York, but Selina and Moira had not yet grown tired of their own private form of celebration, through which the cheers slowly mounted to any figure that Nurse would allow before breaking in sternly with: “That'll do, children; that'll be enough for to-day.”

This particular afternoon she was busy ironing and no doubt glad to have them safely, if not quietly, occupied, for she did not interrupt them even after they had got into the hundreds. They were actually singing:

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"Hip! Hip! Hip! Hooray!

A hunderd-an'-forty-eight cheers for the Princess May!

Hip! Hip! Hip! Hooray!

A hunderd-an'-forty-nine cheers for myself!"

when the Dreadful Blow fell.

Selina always thought of it afterwards as the Dreadful Blow—recalling a phrase she had heard Mother use when telling a visitor that Cook had given notice—"really, my dear, it was a dreadful blow. . . ." There was something particularly cruel and dreadful in the way it fell upon their sunny afternoon. They were so happy—they were revelling in their first free, untrammelled celebration of the Royal Wedding, the air was sweet with the hot, delicious smell of ironing, and in half an hour, when Nurse was done, they were going into the Markwick Gardens which would be at their July best . . . and Platnix was only a fortnight ahead; indeed the Quiet Delight was almost due to begin . . . it might even have begun that very afternoon if the Dreadful Blow had not fallen first.

"A hunderd-an'-forty-nine cheers for myself!" . . .

The door opened and Rose came in with a telegram. Her appearance at that hour was in itself sufficiently remarkable, and the telegram was for Nurse. Never in their lives had such a thing happened before, and the children fell silent as she took it off Rose's tray. They noticed that her lips were tight; in those days telegrams were still ominous; the orange envelope was almost sure to contain some startling news, which might be good but was more likely to be bad. . . . Nurse's lips grew even tighter as she read, and turned down at the corners.

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"The boy's waiting for an answer," said Rose, fully sharing the moment's tensiety.

Nurse said nothing. Then suddenly she began folding the telegram very small—smaller and smaller, as if she wanted, somehow, to fold it away to nothing. Then at last her voice came—rather queerly.

"I must speak to Mrs. South. Please stay here with the children."

"Rose! Rose! what is it?" cried Selina, as without even looking at them, Nurse whisked out of the room.

"I guess she's had some bad news," said Rose.

Moira twisted her face for crying, and Selina immediately followed her example. This sudden break-up of their peaceful, cheerful afternoon had shocked them into fear and grief, and they were both roaring lustily, in spite of Rose's attempts at pacification, when a few minutes later their mother came into the room.

"Now, children, you mustn't cry like this."

"Mother, Mother! what is it?"—"Mother! Mother! I'm frightened!"

Two pairs of arms were round her waist and two separate bellows were deadened in the fullness of her skirt.

"Children! listen! Now you really must be good. You really must help Mother a little."

Poor woman! Certainly it was bad enough to be told that your Nurse must leave you immediately, just after you had everything fixed for the holiday made annually precarious by your husband's business—certainly all this was bad enough in itself without having your children squealing round your knees like pigs; and before they knew the worst, too . . . what would happen when their woe no longer fed on shadows

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but on the substance of a first-class nursery catastrophe?

As a matter of fact, nothing more happened than was happening already. Neither Moira nor Selina could yell any louder or cling any tighter.

"Oh, oh! Oh! what shall I do!"—"Mother! Mother! help me! I shall die"—and finally from them both in ironic climax, "Nurse! Nurse! Oh, I want Nurse!"

Mrs. South resorted to anger.

"Now, if you don't behave at once I shall be very cross. You ought to be thinking how you can help Mother at a time like this—and Nurse, too; think of poor Nurse"—shamefacedly aware that she had not herself thought very much of poor Nurse.

"Nurse, Nurse! I want Nurse!" sobbed Moira mechanically.

"When is she going?" wailed Selina.

"I don't quite know. She's looking up her train."

"When will she come back?"

"Oh, soon, I hope"—she certainly hoped it, though her hope was not as confident and ringing as her voice. She knew that Nurse's Mother was not strong and that the only sister was married, so that her father's death, by every known precedent, meant . . . but she would not let herself think of what it meant.

"She has to go home for the funeral of course," she explained to herself as much as to the children, "but afterwards I daresay her mother will go to live with Hannah and her husband. They'd never ask Nurse——"

"Nurse! Nurse! I want Nurse!"—Moira's response came as automatically as if the word had touched a

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spring. But Selina's thoughts had mercifully been divided.

"May we go to the funeral?"

"I'm afraid not. Horsham is too far away."

"Oh, can't we? I should so much like to go to a funeral. I've never seen a funeral, except passing in the street, and then it's never anyone we know. Oh, Mother, please. . . ."

There was a threat of the storm blowing up from a new quarter.

"You shall send a lovely wreath instead," poor Mother countered desperately. "A wreath or a cross of flowers. We'll go to Ralph's and order one this very afternoon."

She had spoken well and was rewarded by her daughter's smiles.

"Oh, Mother, may we? How lovely! May I choose what flowers we'll have? Roses and lilies and sun-flowers and peonies and rhody-dy-dy-dendrons?"

Selina was skipping and dancing with delight when Nurse came back into the room.

§ 2

The funeral wreath saved the afternoon for Mrs. South. Even Moira recovered her wonted placidity in the spellbinding atmosphere of Ralph's Nurseries. They chose white lilies and carnations—Mother said the flowers had to be white, just as if Nurse's father was being married instead of buried—with sprays of lily of the valley and a misty-looking flower with a most extraordinary name, which made the whole thing look cloudy and religious. Then Selina was allowed to write

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on the card that went with it, Mother telling her how to spell "sympathy" and Moira adding her name in printing-letters at the end.

It was not till they came home to the empty nursery that the realisation of their loss once more swept over them. Even tea in the drawing-room, with thin bread and butter and chocolate cake, did not comfort them very much. Indeed Selina found herself actually longing for tea in the nursery, with thick bread and butter, thick cups and saucers, and Nurse sitting there behind the tea-cosy telling them not to eat with their mouths full or to sit with their elbows on the table . . . the vision dissolved in tears.

Tears were, in fact, liable to burst forth at any moment during the evening; even after their mother had had the inspiration to send round for Baa to come in and play with them. Baa certainly did her best to make things sound less awful—she actually said that it would be rather fun, being without Nurse.

"Why, you might even learn how to bath yourselves. *That* wouldn't be a bad idea."

But the thought only confronted them with a new aspect of their dereliction.

"Mother, who's going to bath us tonight?"

"I think Rose had better do it."

"Oh, Mother, no! Please don't!"—"She's awful—she gets our flannels mixed"—"and she hurts my ears"—"and she doesn't give me time to get out of the room before the bath begins to gurgle."

"I'll bath you," said Baa.

Once more, magically, tears became smiles, and Mrs. South found herself ignoring the counsels of prudence

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and the lessons of experience in her anxiety to maintain this relief.

"Very well, Baa shall bath you. You'll be careful, won't you, dear, and rinse out the bath when you've finished?"

"Oh yes, I promise I will."

"And see that they're properly dried?"

"Oh, rather!"

"And you won't make me stay in the room while the bath gurgles?"—Selina put in her usual plea.

"I've half a mind to put you down the waste-pipe and make *you* gurgle, you wretched little cowardly-custard," said Baa, but her tone was one of jolly reassurance.

"Oh, hooray! let's go to bed at once!" cried Moira.

Who shall blame Mrs. South for settling herself comfortably on her sofa and shutting her ears as much as possible to the noise that seemed to rock the upper story of the house. . . . She'll send them to bed in a good mood . . . they won't think any more about Nurse tonight . . . oh, dear, what was that? . . . no, I'm not going to worry. . . . But I hope they won't be too excited to say their prayers.

§ 3

She need not have been troubled on this last account, for Selina came to bed in a remarkable prayerful state. Indeed, she remained so long on her knees that Mother had at last to say—"That will do now, darling."

"But, Mother, I was having such lovely thoughts. I was thinking of God dying for Nurse's father."

Mrs. South vaguely disapproved, without quite

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knowing why, of Selina's increasing preoccupation with another world.

"Quite right, dear," she said hurriedly. "But it's time you were in bed. Eat your sweet and go to sleep at once."

Every night there was a sweet in a screw of paper under each little girl's pillow.

"But, Mother, I can't go to sleep. I'm too excited."

"Excited about what?"

"About God dying for Nurse's father."

"Ssshhh," said Mother firmly.

"But, Mother, I *am* excited. Why mayn't I be?"

"People aren't meant to be excited about such things."

"But I am, and oh Mother! when you think ——"

"Now go to sleep at once, dear. I don't want you excited about *anything*. It's too late."

Selina cuddled down into the bedclothes, but she could not help being excited all the same. At this very moment, perhaps, God was being born as a baby in the stable, and the angels were singing round it as they sang on the Christmas cards among the frosting . . . and for the next ever-so-many years, He would be on earth, walking about and talking and curing people and calming the sea, away in Palestine, until the time came for Him to die on the cross. He died for everyone, she knew, so every time a person died He came to earth and did it again. He was now on earth, living and dying for Nurse's father. Then He would go back to heaven till someone else died. Perhaps before then she would be old enough to go to Palestine and see Him . . . the thought passed over her like a rosy cloud, wafting her into sleep.

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Alas! It was a very different sort of cloud that, an hour later, whirled her back to consciousness. She was first aware of a darkness that seemed full of sound and uproar, voices and a strange noise that she did not understand. She cried out, and the darkness became a faint glow as she bounced up in bed and faced the nightlight. But the voices and the confusion remained—she had not dreamed them. Mother was calling “Ted! Ted!” and somebody was running upstairs.

Then suddenly Selina remembered that Nurse was away, that there was no cheerful gas burning in the day nursery or sewing machine whirring there . . . she was alone—friendless and forsaken—with something dreadful going on in the house. . . . She lifted up her voice and wailed.

“Mother! Mother!”

Gone were the consolations of religion. Palestine with its Heavenly Visitant seemed as far away as heaven. She wanted Mother, or rather she wanted Nurse.

“Nurse! Nurse!”

Moir awoke to take her share of clamour.

“Mother! Nurse!” . . . “Mother! Nurse!”

After what seemed an age, Mother came running in.

“Now don’t be frightened, darlings. There’s nothing to be frightened of.”

“What is it? What’s happened?”

“Something very funny, really”—Mother’s smile was rather peculiar. “It’s that naughty Baa! When she rinsed out the bath she forgot to turn the tap off, and the bath overflowed until the water was all over

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the floor. Then, what do you think happened? Father's dressing-room ceiling fell down and the water poured through on to his nice new carpet."

Moira thought this distinctly funny and said so, but Selina was still frightened.

"Mother, will the water come all over the house and drown us?"

"No, of course not. The tap's been turned off."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I did it myself. Now, Selina, please don't be silly."

"I 'spect Father's dressing-room looks funny without a ceiling," said Moira.

"Yes, dear, very funny. And I really must go and help them clear up the mess, so you be two good little girls and go to sleep. In half an hour, Rose will come and sleep in Nurse's bed."

This created a happy diversion.

"Oh, Mother, will she? How lovely! Shall we see her undress?"

"No, no; she'll undress upstairs. Besides, I hope you'll both be fast asleep by that time and not see anything."

"I want to see if she wears a pig-tail," said Moira.

"You can see that when she gets up in the morning."

"Oh yes, so we can. I'll wake up before she does and we'll sing 'Hip, hip, hip, hooray! Three cheers for the Princess May!' till it's time for us to be dressed."

But at this heartless evocation of memory Selina's terror and grief burst out afresh.

"Mother! Mother! I want Nurse! I shall *die* if I don't have Nurse."

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§ 4

The next morning dawned, grey and nurseless. Even Rose's pig-tail was a disappointment, as it was quite ordinary and tied with tape. As soon as they were dressed they were taken into Mother's bedroom and given some biscuits from her early morning tea-tray. But Selina could not find any comfort in this unexpected treat, though to some extent it buried the past for Moira, because she knew that next door, hidden from them only by a little paint and wall-paper, was the ghastly ruin of Father's dressing-room.

At first, all innocent and unknowing, she had run in to see what it looked like without a ceiling, but had withdrawn horrified at the spectacle of that gaping void where fair white plaster should have been, of that hideous exposure of the joists of the floor above. It looked worse even than when the paint had worn off the inside of the bath—a period during which she had steadfastly refused to enter the room; it reminded her of the dreadful old tumble-down cottages there were in some fields round Westfield, cottages she never allowed herself to look at, but passed with averted face and quivering lip. And in some odd, sinister way it was all linked up with Nurse's going; which of course it was, for if Nurse hadn't been away Baa wouldn't have given them their baths and left the tap running. But that was not the way Selina meant. . . . She backed out of the room.

"Mother, it's awful. How soon will it be mended?"

"When we're all away," said Mother brightly, wondering when that would be.

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"Not before then? Oh, Mother, it must be! I can't bear its being like that."

"We can't have workmen there while Father's using it. It's quite all right, darling—it's quite safe. No more of its going to fall down."

"But that isn't what I mind, Mother. I'm not afraid of its being dangerous but I'm afraid of its looking so horrid."

She did her best to explain. Mother only said she ought to think of other people at a time like this and try to give as little trouble as possible.

Selina tried, but there were moments when no amount of trying seemed to be of any use. She simply could not bring herself to pass the dressing-room door when it was open, and even when it was shut she could only sidle by, shying like a horse. Mother had thought that it would be both a convenience and a treat if the children had their meals in the dining-room while Nurse was away; but there was the difficulty of getting Selina past the dressing-room, and that first morning Rose had to be sent up to have breakfast with her in the nursery. The problem was finally solved by Baa, who had created it. She made Selina put on her sunbonnet when she washed her hands before dinner, and thus blinkered it was possible for her to walk downstairs without disabling reactions.

§ 5

In the afternoon Mother took them out for a walk and told them that they could each choose a six-penny toy at Jephson's. Poor Mother! she certainly

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worked hard and did her best; it was not her fault that her stoutest effort fell short of Nurse's most casual achievement. However, on this particular occasion she was rewarded. In Jephson's shop, on the counter just inside the door, Selina saw a dear little pink note-book. It was made of a sort of shiny stuff and in the corner there was a gold pattern. Immediately she became the personification of desire—her face as pink as the note-book, her breath panting irregularly through little squeaks, while she hopped from one foot to the other.

"Oh, Mother, Mother! look!"

"What is it, dear?"

"That darling, sweet little pink note-book. Mother, do you think I could have it instead of a toy?"

"Yes; if it costs no more than sixpence."

The note-book, they were told, cost a shilling.

"Oh, Mother . . ."

"Come on, dear, and look at the toys."

"But, Mother, I don't want a toy—not now I've seen that note-book."

"You can't really want a note-book. You'd be much happier with a toy."

"No, no, not now. Oh, Mother, *please*."

"But what do you want it for?"

"To write things in. Oh, Mother, Mother! It's come to me suddenly. I want to write a poem about Nurse."

The inspiration that had come to her was almost an agony. She saw a long, beautiful poem about Nurse filling the pages of that dear little note-book . . . all about Nurse's going away, the long misery of her absence, and then the bursting glory of her return. She felt she wanted to start writing it that very mo-

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ment, she could not bear to wait; and she must have the note-book—she must! she must! She gazed imploringly at her Mother and at the shop-woman, hoping that one or the other of them would relent.

It was Mother who did so. She saw the practical side of Selina's obsession; the note-book would keep her busy and happy for a long time. It would be worth the money, even though it meant inevitably a shilling toy for Moira. She took out her purse and in a minute Selina was the happiest little girl in Hastings. Gone were regrets and longings and fears; Nurse was no longer an absent security, but a poem. A glory sang in Selina's head all the way home.

She almost forgot the dangers of Father's dressing-room as she ran past it into the nursery, where Rose was laying the table for tea.

"Oh, Rose! leave a place for me to write at. I must begin at once."

But she was not allowed to begin till tea was ended, and of course that afternoon tea seemed to last forever. Moira kept on holding out her mug to be re-filled and ate an astonishing amount of bread and jam. The poet herself did not actually fast, but she impatiently watched her sister.

"Oh, Moira, do hurry up. I want to begin."

Nurse would have severely rebuked such an entreaty, and for the first time Selina appreciated the advantages of Rose as President of the tea-table.

"Yes, you get on with it, Moira. I've all my mending still to do."

Moira obligingly got on with it; the effects of her good will were removed from her countenance with a sponge, and she was sent down to be "read to" in

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the drawing-room. Selina was now free to surrender to the influence that had been stealing over her from the moment she first saw the pink note-book. She sat down at the table, in the shaft of golden light that poured in from the sunset, and wrote:

Now the day is over,
Neight is droring ny,
Shaddows of the evnung
Steel accross the sky.

This was not strictly original, being in all except the spelling a literal transcript of the first verse of Number 346 from Hymns Ancient and Modern. But it had the double advantage of filling a whole page of the pink note-book and of expressing Selina's mood entirely. She gazed at it with satisfaction, and then wrote on:

Oh children dear there sweat Nurse said,
This is a dredful day,
For a most orful thing has hapened
And I must go away.

The next verse described the reactions of "my little baby dear and my little May." Selina did not really like May as a girl's name, but it was good for rhyming purposes and she realized that she must do all she could to reduce her difficulties on this score. For the poem was to be a very, very long one. The note-book contained twenty-five pages and that meant twenty-five verses, unless she put in a few illustrations to fill up. . . . She might do that—she was not sure.

Two verses were devoted to the "wow and gureef" of the abandoned children, and then Rose came in

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with Moira to put them both to bed. In vain Selina pleaded to be allowed to wait till she had found a rhyme for "nursery." Rose declared that she was busy and that they must undress at once.

But there was comfort in the thought that tomorrow morning she could go on with the poem, and that she might even make up another verse or two in her head tonight if she did not go to sleep too quickly. She was happier than she had been at any time since Nurse's departure; in fact, she was as happy as she had been before it. In some mysterious way the poem seemed to have taken away her troubles. When she was in bed that night she forgot all about Father's dressing-room—the broken horror only just across the landing—but turned over shining thoughts in her head, thoughts that occasionally had a word embedded in them like a diamond, but were mostly wordless and golden, becoming dreams before she was aware of it.

The next day was just as good. The poem flowed on—if such a word can be applied to the slow manœuvrings of Selina's pencil over, and sometimes through, the pages of the pink note-book. Mother congratulated herself; she had had her shillings-worth over and over again. For not only was Selina's leisure all peacefully occupied, but in some marvellous way her writings seemed to have absorbed her griefs and panics, leaving her the quiet, sensible, well-behaved little girl that Mother had always longed for. It was hard, perhaps, for Moira to have no one to play with, but she was quite easily amused with toys and picture-books and there was the further advantage that their separate occupations did not lead to quarrelling—even Trimmer and Pearl were in abeyance for a while. Certainly

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Mrs. South had every reason to approve of her daughter's literary aspirations, and Selina would never be able to complain of parental discouragement at the beginning of her career.

§ 6

This happy state still prevailed in the nursery when the expected and dreaded letter came announcing that Nurse would not be able to come back to them. She would have to stay at home, as Mrs. South had feared, and look after her mother, who was old and ailing.

I cannot tell you, Ma'am, how unhappy I shall be without the children, and I am afraid you will have a difficulty in finding someone in time to go with them to Platnix. I hope, if convenient to you, Ma'am, to come back on Thursday to collect my things. The wash will be back by that time. I will then get their clothes thoroughly mended up and in good order and finish that frock of Selina's I was making. But I cannot stay after Monday as my sister has to leave then. I am so sorry, Ma'am, indeed I cannot think what I shall do away from you all, but I am sure you will understand.

Yours obediently,
Nurse

Selina was so transfigured by the act of creation that she heard the gist of this letter quite calmly. But it must be confessed that Mother wasn't quite brave enough to tell the whole truth, and merely gave them to understand that Nurse wouldn't be able to go with them to Platnix.

"Who'll go with us, then?" asked Moira.

"I don't know. I must find somebody. How would

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you like a nursery governess?"—thinking that field would yield more quickly than any other.

"What's a nursery governess?"

"The same as Nurse, only a lady."

"A lady!—will she sit in the drawing-room?"

"Oh, no, she'll sit upstairs with you. But I haven't found her yet—I was only thinking. . . . That's right, Selina. Get on with your poem, dear."

"I must get on, Mother, because I want to write the bit about when the Nurse comes back. The Nurse in my poem comes back, you know, and she stays forever."

"I want Nurse to stay forever," said Moira, wrinkling up her face.

"Now, darling, be good," pleaded Mother. "You'll be seeing Nurse again quite soon."

"And if she's good she can hear my poem," said Selina. "I've done a lot more, Moira, since I told you the last bit."

"What have you done?"

"I've done the bit about their looking out of the window, and part of the bit about the sewing-machine. Mother, do you think sewing-machine could be made to rhyme with dream?"

"Yes, dear, I'm sure it could."

"Oh, that's splendid. Now I've got it. Listen, Moira —

And oh the lovely sound that comes
From the busy sewing-machine!
Even though she is here no more,
I hear it in a dream.

Don't you think that's nice, Mother?"

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But Mother had gone out of the room, thankful to leave the two heads bent together over the nursery table.

Thursday was the very next day, so Selina had not time to finish her poem before Nurse arrived. She would have liked to do so, but a number of things happened to prevent her. They went out to tea with the Roseberry children that afternoon, which was nice, but meant the loss of at least two verses; and then Moira would insist on her introducing the Buttonny Nurse.

That was the worst of Moira. She would always have her own ideas introduced into Selina's poems and stories directly she knew about them. It would probably be wise not to tell her anything, but Selina found that she must have an audience of some sort, and not only was Moira more ready to listen than anyone else, but on the whole she was much more appreciative, in spite of her interferences.

“The buttonny nurse
She lost her purse.”

I want that in, Selina.”

“But it doesn't fit, and we haven't said it for ages.”

“I want it in. I like it. I used to call Nurse ‘Purse’—don't you remember?”

“So did I. But I was only six.”

Two whole years ago they had called her the Buttonny Nurse because of the buttons she wore down the front of her bodice—a tight row of them; and purse rhymed with nurse. At her present age it seemed to Selina a simple ditty, without beauty or romance.

“The baby could say it,” said Moira. She was always

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willing to accept a humble position for her literary interpolations, but she would not let them be missed out altogether.

In the end Selina gave way, largely influenced by the thought that "the Buttonny Nurse," though inadequate and babyish, would at least fill two lines of the pink note-book. She still had eleven blank pages before her in spite of all her industry, and she had wasted a long time arguing with Moira.

"Very well, then—when she comes in at the door, the baby can say 'the buttonny nurse.' I'll get it in, though it'll be difficult for me to manage. Now I want to write the part about their Mother telling them that the Nurse is coming back."

§ 7

Nurse arrived before they expected her, while Mother was having tea with them in the nursery, as a treat. She appeared almost magically in the doorway—they did not even hear her come upstairs—and at once the scene was etched on Selina's memory: the big room full of sunshine, Mother, Moira, and herself at the table in the bow-window, and Nurse standing just inside the door, looking strange and different in her black hat and coat, and also younger in some curious way, her hair all loose and fluffy in the light. . . .

In her memory they were held like that for ages, without moving or speaking, but it could not really have been long before Moira suddenly pointed with her spoon and said in a loud voice—

"Purse!"

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Then a curious thing happened. Instead of coming forward into the room, or even telling Moira not to point, Nurse suddenly bowed her head into her black-gloved hands, and her shoulders shook. She was crying.

Never in all their lives had the children seen Nurse, or for that matter any grown-up person, cry. They sat open-mouthed and motionless while the strange scene developed itself still further. Mother rose from the tea-table, and, going up to Nurse, put her arm around her and patted her shoulder—again something unprecedented and unknown. Moira began to whimper.

Selina, a little to her own surprise, did not even want to cry. There was an extraordinary feeling inside her—a feeling that was partly sad and partly excited. The only other time she had felt at all like it was when the organ in Church had played a strange rumbling tune that Mother had told her was the Dead March. . . . But even that had not been quite the same, for this time in some mysterious way she felt almost grown-up—as if she had been asked to assist at an important grown-up occasion. . . . She sat very still while Mother led Nurse up to the table and poured her out a cup of tea.

“Drink that, dear,” she said, though she had never called Nurse “dear” in her life before. “Now, Moira, be a good little girl.”

Moira continued to wail until Nurse herself comforted her. When she had drunk her tea, she smiled and kissed them both.

“I hope you’ve been good.”

“Oh, yes,” said Moira, “at least I have. Selina was frightened when Father’s dressing-room ceiling fell

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down, and now she won't go past the door without her sunbonnet."

"Don't tell tales, Moira," said Mother. "Selina's been very good on the whole; she's been writing a poem."

"Yes— Mother bought her a note-book to write it in, and she bought me dolls' food on plates. Nurse, have you brought us back any presents?"

Selina felt ashamed of her. Moira knew nothing about things, or she would not talk like that.

She herself felt full of a strange knowledge. For the first time she realised that Nurse must be unhappy because her father was dead. Hitherto she had seen nothing of his death beyond its effect on herself, with a brief, heady glimpse of its repercussions in another world. But now she seemed to know something of what Nurse was feeling—actually, indeed, to be sorry for her. This morning she would not have believed anyone who had told her that she could ever feel sorry for Nurse, but now she really did feel sorry for her as she watched her drinking her tea, with her hat a little on one side and her eyes still red.

As usual she planned how she could give expression to these new discoveries and emotions. They ought certainly to come into the poem, but at the moment she found it difficult to see how. Her original plan for the Nurse's return had not included crying or sorrow; it had all been relief and excitement and jumping for joy. That ending now seemed to Selina a little childish—something, almost, that Moira could have written. Of course the Nurse in the poem had come back forever, but even so she would be unhappy because her father was dead. . . .

As soon as Nurse had finished her tea, she went out

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of the room with Mother, and the children were left alone. Selina still sat silent and brooding, scarcely noticing Moira's chatter as it flowed round her.

"Nurse doesn't cry like us. She doesn't open her mouth or make a noise. When I cry I make a noise."

Selina said nothing.

"And so do you."

Selina still said nothing.

"*Why* doesn't Nurse make a noise when she cries?"

"Because grown-up people don't."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Oh, please do let me alone. I'm thinking."

Moira said no more just then, but later on when Mother was kissing her good-night, she remarked:

"Mother, when next I cry, I shall cry like a grown-up person—without making a noise."

"That will be very nice," said Mother heartily.

§ 8

By the time Nurse had undressed her and bathed her and put her to bed, Selina no longer felt like a grown-up person. Indeed, the next morning she felt very much as usual, wanting her own way and arguing with Nurse, just as if she had never seen her cry. The only real change in her seemed to be that for some curious reason she did not want to go on with the poem. After breakfast, Nurse, who took the same view of it as Mother, put the pink note-book on the table and suggested that Selina should write some more. But though she sat with her pencil in her mouth for quite five minutes she could not think of anything

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except what a lot more she would have to write before the poem was finished. Eleven blank pages . . . she could not fill them up; and she did not think that she even wanted to. . . . Somehow or other the poem had ceased to be interesting—she did not want to go on with it.

“Nurse, I don’t think I shall do any writing this morning. I’d rather play with the Lodge.”

“Oh, dear! Aren’t you going to fill up that dear little note-book?”

“No, I’ve filled half of it and I really can’t do any more. Some day perhaps I’ll draw pictures of Trimmer on the other pages.”

Nurse was sorry, for the Lodge was not so good as poetry for her own morning’s work. But she could not force Selina to coax her reluctant muse, and soon the nursery was shrill with the controversies of the two Kind Friends.

The pink note-book was forgotten; Selina did not even remember to take it to Platnix with her when she went. It would be hard to say what had happened to dry so suddenly the founts of such a vigorous inspiration. Perhaps it was the shock of having seen Nurse cry, or perhaps the discovery that there were some things in life that she could not express in words; or it may just have been those eleven empty pages. . . . Who shall decide? Certainly not Selina herself. When the note-book finally found its way into the dust-bin it contained several verses of poetry, two drawings of Trimmer—one of her in a party frock and another of her giving a diamond as large as an egg to a grateful organ-grinder—a shocking drawing by Moira, meant to be Mother in her new Sunday bonnet, and some jottings of nursery accounts.

CHAPTER SIX

Miss Thompson's Father

§ I

"REALLY," SAID MOTHER, "YOU TWO ARE VERY LUCKY little girls."

She came smiling into the nursery, as if she had something very nice to tell them.

"What's happened?" cried Selina, jumping up from the floor where she was building an oast-house out of a box of Hechtman's "stone bricks" and a great deal of loving imagination.

"Something very nice."

"Oh, do tell us what it is. Don't make us guess."

"Is it a present?" asked Moira.

Mother laughed.

"Well, I'm paying quite a lot for it, anyhow."

"Is it something to eat or something to play with?"

"You can't eat it, but I certainly hope you'll play with it, or rather that it'll play with you."

"Mother! Mother!" cried Selina in extasy. "I believe it's alive. Oh, tell me—" as hope indomitably raised its battered head—"is it a pony?"

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"No, it's not a pony. But it's alive. I won't keep you guessing any longer. It's a charming delightful lady."

Both little girls stared at her in silence.

"You know I told you I might get you a Nursery Governess," continued Mother in a voice that was still bright but not quite so certain. "Well, I've found an extremely nice one to come here tomorrow and take you to Platnix next week."

The silence continued a few seconds longer, till Selina asked:

"Then why did you say we were lucky little girls?"

"Well, aren't you? Here you are, right at the last moment, able to go to Platnix after all."

"But Mother! Mother!" loud screams broke from both her daughters. "We always were going to Platnix, weren't we? You never said we couldn't go because of Nurse."

In a situation where it seems always necessary to keep back some of the truth it is difficult to remember exactly what you did and what you did not say, and Mrs. South saw that she had blundered. The children had not even imagined that they might not be going to Platnix next Tuesday.

"You couldn't have gone if I had no one to send with you."

"Why not? Miss Huggett could have looked after us."

"Miss Huggett is far too busy. No, if I hadn't found somebody like this, we'd have been obliged to put it off until I had."

Both little girls shuddered. So perhaps they were lucky, after all, though Selina still felt she would much

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rather have a pony, or indeed any sort of animal, than a nursery governess.

"Her name's Miss Thompson," continued Mother, "and she used to be with Mrs. Rivers's sister, looking after her little boy."

"Will she stay with us till Nurse comes back?" asked Selina.

"Oh, no. She's got another place to go to as soon as the holidays are over. It's just a piece of luck for us that she happens to be free now."

"But Nurse is coming back after the holidays, isn't she?" said Moira.

Mother saw that again she had blundered, and this time seriously.

"Isn't she, Mother?" cried both little girls together.

"Well, dears, perhaps not just at once. . . ."

"Oh, Mother! She must! She must! I can't bear to live here without her," cried Selina. "It's all right at Platnix, because there we've got Maidie and Rosie and Mr. and Mrs. Huggett and the farm-men and the animals, but here we've got n-n-n-nobody . . ." and she stammered into tears.

"Nurse! Nurse! I want Nurse!" Moira's slogan—unheard for almost three days—rose in all its piercing frenzy.

Mother may perhaps be forgiven for persisting in compromise.

"Nurse will come back the moment she can, I'm sure."

"Why can't she come now?"

"You know quite well, dear. She has to stay and look after her mother."

"And have we got to wait till her mother dies?"

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"Of course not, Selina! you really mustn't say such things. Perhaps some day Nurse's sister and her husband will take her mother to live with them—" a situation she knew to be almost impossible.

"Why don't they take her now?"

"Because they haven't room in their house."

"Will they have room soon?"

"I don't know, darling. I hope so."

"I hope she dies," said Moira. "It 'ud be much nicer."

"Moira! how dare you! You really are a very naughty little girl to talk like that, after what I said to Selina. If either of you says another word about Nurse's mother dying, I shall punish you severely."

§ 2

The next day Miss Thompson arrived. Mother herself brought her up into the nursery. She was not at all like Nurse, being small and dark, and she wore quite different clothes. She said:

"So these are the dear children. I hope we're going to like each other very much."

The children were not sure if they were going to like her at all. First and foremost, she was not Nurse; secondly she was not a pony; thirdly she addressed Selina as "Moira"—a very stupid and annoying mistake.

"I'm Selina—I'm the eldest. I'm eight—she's only six."

"I see—but really you're so much alike that it's hard to tell you apart."

"Oh, do you think so?" said Mother. "Moira is

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really much fairer and quite two inches shorter than Selina."

"And my hair curls and hers doesn't and I've got a pink mark on my leg, just where my drawers begin, and I've lost a front tooth, though you can't see it because a new one has grown in behind, and I know my six-times-table and she's only in the three-times, and I'm in Book Four of the Royal Reader and she's only in Book Two. . . ."

"Selina, don't boast," said Mother.

"I'm not boasting—I'm only telling her how she can know us apart."

"I'll know you apart all right," laughed Miss Thompson.

"Yes, for I can whistle and she can't," said Moira, which alas! was true.

Mother went away downstairs, and Miss Thompson went into the night nursery to unpack. The children were very curious to know what she had brought with her, but she shoo'd them out of the room when they ran in to see. Mother had told them that though she was a nursery governess she would be exactly like Nurse, so when she came back into the day nursery they were surprised to find that she wore a blouse and skirt, like mother, and that her hair was done very smartly with fuzzy bits in front. Even when bath-time came, which it did very soon after her arrival, she did not put on an apron.

"Now which of you has her bath first?"

"Moira; because she's the youngest."

"Then run upstairs, Moira, and turn on the tap."

The children were tremendously surprised. Nurse always went upstairs and turned on the bath before

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undressing them. But they both thought Miss Thompson's way more exciting—it gave them a pleasing sense of independence. Moira trotted upstairs clasping her bath-towel, and after a long interval they heard the water running.

Time passed, and Selina began to feel anxious.

"Don't let her run it too long, will you, Miss Thompson. Baa once forgot to turn the tap off and all the water came through into Father's dressing-room, so that now it's too horrid for me to go into."

"I'd better go up and see what she's doing, perhaps," and Miss Thompson went out of the room.

More time passed and Selina waited for her own summons. It was Nurse's rule for her to come upstairs just before Moira had finished her bath, so that she would be ready to pop in directly her sister came out, and a new lot of hot water would not have to be drawn off an inadequate supply. But this evening something must have happened. . . . Selina's mind toyed only briefly with the exciting, sinister idea that Miss Thompson and Moira had both been drowned; she came instead to the more humdrum conclusion that Miss Thompson did not know the correct procedure and had ignored Moira's instructions.

At first she was pleased with the idea of being left so long. The clock pointed to a quarter-to-seven—that was almost a party hour, and for a moment she was thrilled; but the next she felt angry. It was horrid having someone with them who did not know how to do things properly. She wandered about the room, feeling lonely and nurseless again. . . . Then she decided to go up. With a curious mixed feeling of independence and dereliction she managed to unfasten

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her dress and put on her dressing-gown. This took her a long time, but still there was no summons from above, nor did Moira or Miss Thompson come down. . . . Perhaps they were drowned after all. . . . When she reached the bathroom door she found it locked.

"Who's there?" cried Miss Thompson's voice, just as she was beginning to feel frightened.

"Selina."

"We're not ready yet. You must wait a moment."

"I don't want to wait out here. I'm frightened."

She heard some movement inside, then the door opened.

"Come in, then. We shan't be a minute."

Selina came into the steamy room, where Moira stood grinning, wrapped in a bath-towel. Then she saw that Miss Thompson was going to lock the door again.

"Oh, don't do that."

"Why not? Of course I must."

"Nurse never does, and I'm frightened to be in a room when the door is locked."

Her fright dated from a dreadful occasion when something had happened to the lock of the nursery door and they had not been able to get out till Father came up and did something with a screw-driver.

"But I never heard of such a thing," said Miss Thompson. "I never heard of a bathroom door that wasn't locked. Surely no modest little girl would have a bath in a room which anyone could come into."

"But I like people to come into the room when I have a bath," said Selina.

"Then the sooner you learn what modesty is the better."

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"What *is* modesty?" asked Moira gruffly; "is it nice?"

"Of course it's nice, and you are the first children I've met who didn't know at least something about it. Why, the little boy I used to be with before I came here always had his bath alone with the door locked, and he was only seven."

"Could he bath himself?"

"Most certainly he could. I shouldn't have taken charge of him if he couldn't. I don't undertake to give baths to children. My father wouldn't be at all pleased if he knew what I was doing now."

"Why?"

"Because bathing children is a Nurse's job, not a governess's."

"But Mother said you would be exactly the same as Nurse."

Miss Thompson looked offended.

"Then your mother was mistaken, if she really said that—which I don't believe she did. She knows that I'm an officer's daughter."

"Oh, Miss Thompson, is your father an officer in the army? Is he a general?"

"No—not exactly a general. But he's very particular. He doesn't like me going out professionally at all, and he's always most anxious that my position should be kept quite clear and that I shouldn't be asked to do anything menial."

The children were impressed. They were young enough to take Miss Thompson at her own valuation and their minds were full of a dazzling picture of her father in scarlet and gold, with top-boots and a cocked hat streaming with feathers. Fathers were rather in

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the limelight at present, and Miss Thompson's seemed every bit as exciting as Nurse's.

"Tell us about your father!" cried Selina.

Miss Thompson told them vague tales of India and the Egyptian war, and as she told them she did her best to bath Selina. She was miserably ignorant and inexpert, but Selina endured in silence, chiefly because she feared that any allusion to the technique of bathing might remind her that she had omitted to lock the bathroom door. She rejoiced at having escaped this truly terrible evil, and tomorrow she would ask Mother to tell Miss Thompson how to do things properly.

All of a sudden, just as she thought she was safe, a new crisis was upon her. Miss Thompson's hand shot out negligently and opened the waste-pipe.

"Oh, please don't do that. I'm not ready."

"You will be in a moment, and it's time I let the water off, or we'll never be done."

"But Nurse never lets the waste-pipe run till I'm out of the room."

"I can't help what Nurse does. This is what I do."

"Oh, Miss Thompson, please don't. I can't bear it. I'm frightened."

"Frightened of what, you silly child?"

"Of the noise it makes as it runs away and the awful, horrible g-gurgle."

"Really, Selina, you're frightened of far too many things. Pull yourself together and be a brave girl. I shan't close the waste-pipe."

"Then let me go out of the room."

"No, certainly not. You're not dried yet."

Selina lost her head and made a dash at the waste-

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pipe, but Miss Thompson was there before her and would not let her touch it.

"Now I really won't have this nonsense. I insist on your behaving yourself."

Selina burst into tears.

"A great girl of your age! I never did!"

"But I can't bear it! I can't! I can't! I must go."

She heard the sucking noise the waste-pipe always made before it gurgled, and reason deserted her. With a loud screech she tore open the door and dashed out of the room.

Miss Thompson was quite unprepared for this move. Though she realised that her own standard of modesty was very much higher than Selina's she had never expected her to lose sight of the fact that she was stark naked. Yet there she was, running downstairs like a white streak—and not into the nursery, but down the second flight, into the hall, where voices sounded, male as well as female.

"Come back, you naughty girl! come back!"

Miss Thompson's voice had the dry faintness of a voice in a nightmare, and was as little heard by anyone else. Selina did not stop running till she was in her father's arms.

§ 3

Mother blamed herself for having taken advantage of her first free evening to go for a drive. She ought to have stayed in and seen that the governess understood everything about the children's baths. She made haste to atone for her negligence by elaborate explanations.

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"You see, Selina is a very nervous child. She's frightened of a great many things that really are quite ridiculous. But both her father and I think that she'll get over her fears more quickly if she's humoured and not forced. Why she's already outgrown quite a number."

Miss Thompson did not seem impressed, although doubtless she was grateful not to have known Selina earlier.

"And do you wish me to continue bathing them while we're at the farm?" was all she said.

"Oh, yes, if you don't mind. Selina will soon have to learn how to bath herself, but I thought we'd wait a month or two, till she's more used to being without Nurse."

"Well, as it's only for the holidays, I don't mind doing it. But it's not a thing I normally undertake."

"Surely it's quite usual."

"Well, not in my case. You see my father's enormously particular, and doesn't like to think of my even being asked to do anything menial. He wants my position as governess to be perfectly clear."

"Oh, but there's no doubt about that, Miss Thompson." Mother looked at her clothes and thought of her salary.

"Yes, but . . . you see, up till now I've always insisted on a bedroom to myself. It's what my father wishes. Still, as it's only for the holidays. . . ."

"Of course—I know. But, as you say, it's only for the holidays."

Mother could not help feeling a little worried. She began to wonder if Miss Thompson was really a fit person to have charge of her little girls while she was away. But what else could she do?—unless this year

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she denied her husband his hard-earned holiday in Switzerland. It was the old choice between husband and children . . . and in this case the children would be dreadfully disappointed if she chose them.

No, they must go to Platnix with Miss Thompson. After all they would be among friends. She would write to Mrs. English, the Rector's wife, and ask her to let her know at once if anything went wrong. Besides, after the first day, the children seemed quite to like Miss Thompson. She was always telling them stories, and when she asked Selina what the stories were about, she answered: "All about her father." Mrs. South was glad to know that he had other uses. . . .

§ 4

So on a beautiful July afternoon, chokily sweet with the smell of hay, Selina and Moira drove out to Platnix with Father and Miss Thompson. Both little girls were in a high state of excitement, watching for the familiar landmarks and greeting them with squeals of joy. First came the Archway, where the town ended, left behind on the further side of the hill. In front of them lay spread all the country, miles of fields and woods and little red farms—miles beyond Platnix as well as before it. The horses trotted down Baldslow hill with a soft swish of brakes; then came the next landmark—Ireland Farm, away on the left, with its ruddy, weather-tiled gable and crooked windows.

"It's exactly like Platnix," explained Selina rather wildly, "except that at Platnix it's the house that's old and the gable that's new. We live in the gable, so if the old part of the house falls down it doesn't matter."

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Miss Thompson looked depressed.

"And here's the place where the lovely primroses are—only of course they're not there now because they're over. And this is the cross-roads in the hollow. I don't like the road that goes down, do you? . . . and here's Mrs. Kemp's cottage. Oh, Moira, look! she's got a patch of new straw on the roof. It's quite new and yellow—and that's Spray Bridge—oh look! look! look!—and in a minute—in a holy and blessed minute—we shall see Platnix. . . . Yes, yes, I see it. There it is! Look, Miss Thompson—there are the oasthouses and the barn, and that's the house, behind the poplar trees; and inside it are Mister-and-Mrs. Huggett and Miss Huggett, and Rosie and Maidie, and all the farmmen—Batchup and Jarman and Weller and ——"

"Quietly, pet," said Father, "or you'll fall out of the carriage."

Platnix swam into view upon the hill, its three poplar trees rising before it like plumed lances, its barns and oasthouses massed on either side. As usual Selina felt as she looked at it that a whole year had been wiped away and that she had never known any other place than Platnix or any other time than summer. Of course this past year could not be completely forgotten, since it had worked such changes and had affected Platnix itself by introducing Miss Thompson; but when at last they climbed out of the carriage and danced up the garden to the house, neither little girl felt any regrets for Nurse, the unfailing companion of their earlier visits—they found it so very exciting to be showing everything for the first time to her successor.

"Look, Miss Thompson—those are the two pear trees, and here's the red rosebush and there's the white

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one—and, oh yes! there are all the lovely golden nettles in the bank. And do you see the oasthouses? We'll be here for the hop-picking this year, and they dry the hops in there, you know, and a lovely smell comes out . . ." and so on and so on, without noticing that Miss Thompson still looked depressed.

Father had come with them on purpose to introduce her to Mrs. Huggett and her eldest daughter. He shook hands with them, as usual, but the children noticed that Miss Thompson did not shake hands; she only said "good afternoon" rather stiffly. Afterwards, when Father had left them, and they had gone upstairs to unpack in what Selina called the Holy and Blessed Bedroom, her only comment as she looked round was "very primitive accommodation."

Indeed, by the time they had had tea out of the blue and white cups and saucers and the brown teapot, and had put away their toys in the sitting-room cupboard, and had walked round the fields to inspect the ant-heaps, and been bathed in the funny tin bath that was also their travelling trunk, and finally been tucked into bed among the rough, soap-smelling sheets; they had come to the altogether incredible and astounding conclusion that Miss Thompson did not like Platnix.

§ 5

It really was almost impossible to believe it, but what else could they think when she was always grumbling and finding fault with everything? She said that her bed had lumps in it and would not agree that lumps were nice; she was quite angry with Miss Huggett because there was a hole in her face-towel—she

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gave it back to her and said "bring me another one, please" in an awful voice. Miss Huggett went quite pink—she was not used to being spoken to like that; nor was she used to not being spoken to at all while she was clearing away the meals in the sitting-room. She and Nurse had always talked and talked till it had seemed as if nothing else would happen all day.

"Why don't you talk to Miss Huggett when she comes in to clear away?" asked Selina, disturbed to see any part of a familiar ritual abandoned. "Nurse always used to."

"If you don't see by this time the difference between me and your Nurse, I really can't explain it to you any further."

Selina did see a difference, but she was not sure it was what Miss Thompson meant. Before they had been two days at Platnix they had lost all their pleasure in showing her things and would have given anything in the world to have Nurse with them again. In fact Moira had begun to cry for Nurse at night, which annoyed Miss Thompson very much.

But the really dreadful thing about her, the thing which was much worse than her fault-finding or her not talking to people, the thing which came very near to spoiling Platnix completely, was the fact, terrible and unprecedented, that she would not let them play with Rosie and Maidie Huggett.

The prohibition had come the very first day, with all the suddenness and strangeness of a nightmare. They were going out for a walk, to show Miss Thompson the village, and as they passed the farmyard gate, Maidie ran out of it. She was the younger of the Huggett children, just a year older than Selina, and while

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her age made her one of themselves, she had such enviable points of distinction as boots instead of shoes, stockings instead of socks, and instead of their long, ribboned manes and sunbonnets short hair cropped like a boy's and crowned with a boy's cap. She was at one and the same time a comrade and an infinitely superior being; no wonder they greeted her with delight.

"Hullo, Maidie!"

"Hullo."

"Are you going to school today?"

"No, we're still having holidays for the hay-making, but Father's got all his in."

"Then you can come for a walk with us."

"Oh, no she can't," said Miss Thompson.

It would be hard to say whose mouth opened widest—Selina's, Moira's or Maidie's. They all three stood still and stared. Then Selina managed to gasp:

"But she always comes for walks with us—I mean, whenever she wants to."

"Not when I'm here. Run home, little girl, at once."

"But, Miss Thompson, she's Maidie!"

"I don't care who she is—she can't come with us. Hurry up, children; don't stand and stare."

"But, Miss Thompson! Miss Thompson! . . ." A chorus of protests broke from Moira and Selina. Maidie still found words inadequate.

Which indeed they were, for Miss Thompson absolutely refused to listen to them. Instead, she grasped each child firmly by the hand and led them on down the farm-drive.

"Will you never understand," she said, "that when you're with me you must behave properly, like a lady's

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children? I daresay that when your Nurse was here with you she missed no opportunity of associating with her equals. But I absolutely refuse to take common children for walks or to let you speak to them."

"But we *must* speak to Maidie—and Rosie too. They belong to Mrs. Huggett."

"I know that you must speak to them occasionally, but there's no need for you to do it often."

"But, Miss Thompson, we always play with Maidie and Rosie—it's part of being at Platnix."

"As I said, no doubt your Nurse took every advantage of the situation. But things are very different now. Apart from what I know to be my duty as your governess, I have my father's feelings to consider. He would be horrified to think of me mixing in any way with common people."

Selina had not understood this speech in detail, but she gathered enough to feel that it had insulted both Maidie and Nurse, and her anger rose with a hot prick of tears.

"Father and Mother know we play with Rosie and Maidie—they like us to. And father's just as much a gentleman as your father, in fact he's more."

"What do you mean by 'he's more'?"

The question came with a hard icy grip of Miss Thompson's hand on Selina's wrist. She suddenly felt frightened.

"I mean—I mean—I suppose I mean that he must be richer than your father, or ——"

"And you're vulgar and ignorant enough to confuse wealth with good breeding. . . ." Miss Thompson's wrath flowed over her in a tide of half-understood words, culminating in the sentence that she was to

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write out "A gentleman is known by his manners and not by his wealth" twenty times when she got home.

This was a new sort of punishment, and not nearly so bad as the familiar one of being sent to bed before Moira. But though Selina did not bear any grudge against Miss Thompson on that score, her general feeling towards her was one of uneasiness and fear. The fear was not due to any actual severity so much as to a sense of her own helplessness and loneliness. Here were she and Moira in the charge of this strange woman—their Nurse and their parents far away, their real friends cut off from them by unnatural prohibitions. She did not like it—she did not know what to expect or what to do. Every day as it dawned had some faint cloud upon it; this certainly was not like the Platnix of other years.

Of course there was Mrs. English, the Rector's wife, who was as kind and friendly as she had always been. But somehow it never entered the children's heads to complain to her of Miss Thompson or to ask her to help them in their difficulties. Her knowledge of the situation came from a different quarter—from the Huggetts themselves.

"Really I can't think what's come over Mrs. South—sending that proud Madam with those two poor children; she spoils all their joy and pleasure and treats us as if we were common dirt."

Thus Mrs. Huggett, indignantly akimbo; and her daughters chimed in after her:

"I might be a servant the way she speaks to me."
... "She said to me 'Run away, liddle girl'."
... "She wouldn't even let me take them into the loft to see the kittens."

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"Of course Mrs. South was in a very difficult position, with Nurse leaving just at that time. She might have found no one to send with them at all."

"Well, better no one than that lofty hop-pole. Can't you do anything about it, Ma'am? Can't you speak to her?"

Mrs. English said that she would do her best, but the only result of her efforts was a half-hour's dissertation on the sensibilities, gentilities and social recoils of Miss Thompson's father. She was evidently determined to have nothing to do with the Huggett family, and all Mrs. English could think of was to invite Rosie and Maidie to tea on the same day as she invited Selina and Moira. It was really quite a good plan, for though she could not urge the children to secrecy, nor had she any hope of their remaining silent in their own interests, she found that their governess did not much care what they did when they were outside her jurisdiction. She was quite glad to have them taken off her hands occasionally for an hour or two; as, unlike Nurse, she never indulged in an "afternoon off." She said she did not care for wandering about the country by herself, and Moira's information that Nurse used to go out with Jarman was no help at all.

"I wish Miss Thompson would have an afternoon off like Nurse," said Selina to Maidie at the Rectory. "Then Miss Huggett 'ud have to put us to bed, and we'd have tea in the kitchen. Oh, why didn't Mother tell her that we always play with you and Rosie?"

"I guess she never thought of her not letting you. Why don't you write and tell her what's happened and ask her to write to Miss Thompson about it?"

Selina fell silent before a new idea.

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"Maybe she'd let you do it if your Mother said so—she'd have to, I reckon."

"Yes, she'd have to. . . . But how am I to write? She'd never let me say all that in a letter."

"Can't you write without her knowing?"

"I shouldn't know where to write to. We always put our letters inside hers."

"Well, if I was you I should write separate. You can easily find out the address, and if you give me the letter I'll post it."

"But I haven't any paper."

"I have—leastways, Rosie has and I'll get you some or hern."

It sounded like an excellent plan. Selina felt quite equal now to writing a letter by herself. It was only the spelling that she had still to be helped with, and as it seemed to her that spelling was quite arbitrary and words were just as clear spelt one way as another, that did not really matter much. All that mattered was the address, and that she could probably find out with a little skilful questioning. Certainly something must be done, for already a fortnight of their holiday had gone by in this wretched manner. She felt quite sure that Miss Thompson would let them play with Maidie and Rosie if Mother wrote and told her to do so.

Accordingly, the very next day she asked:

"What's Mother's address in Switzerland?"

"She last wrote from the Hotel Bonnivard, Lucerne. Don't you remember?"

"No, I only remember that it sounded queer," and she repeated over and over to herself, so that she should not forget it—"Hotel Bonni-var, Luchern."

Her opportunities for letter-writing were few; but

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on the other hand Miss Thompson's supervision was much less strict than Nurse's, and it was quite possible, while she sat reading or at work in the sitting-room and the children were supposed to be playing in the garden, to enjoy a few moments' perilous intercourse over the fence with Rosie and Maidie. Over the fence was handed Rosie's note-paper and envelope—pale mauve with a crinkled gold edge—and over the fence in due time went the completed letter, written in pencil and rather smeary with grass.

It ran:

Dear Mother ples will you rite to Miss Tomson and tell her we are to play with Maidy and Rosy becas she wont let us and says it will upsett her father. Dont tell her I told you. I hop you and father are enjoyying yursels in Swizzerland this is Rosyes notpapper. issunt it prety. Love from

Selina.

and was addressed to

Mrs. South,
Howtel Bonny Var
Luch Ern.

"What about a stamp?" she asked Maidie. "I haven't got one, and I haven't got a penny."

"I'll ask Mum if I can tääke one of hern. She's got several."

"Oh, thank you so much."

"Well, I reckon this helps me as well as you. It's tejus awkward, us not being able to play together."

"Selina! Selina! what are you doing?"

Miss Thompson had heard the alien voice and called her in.

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§ 6

The next few days were spent in anxious waiting for Mother's letter. Selina was in some distress with her secret. Moira might come out with it any moment, for she could not keep secrets and had already committed several indiscretions, which had led to nothing worse only because Miss Thompson did not know what she was talking about.

Not that she could do anything now that the letter was safely posted, but she might be most disagreeably angry. Somehow, Selina was frightened of Miss Thompson's anger in a way she had never been frightened of Nurse's. She sincerely hoped her share in the business would not become known, and it never occurred to her that if Miss Thompson received a sudden command from Mother to let them play with Maidie and Rosie she would immediately suspect some first cause in the way of complaint.

As a rule Mrs. South wrote once a week from Switzerland, and when, about three days later, a letter arrived, Selina made sure that it was in answer to hers. Miss Thompson, as usual, read it aloud, as well as giving the children their little letters written specially for them. There was nothing in it whatever about Rosie and Maidie.

"Is that all she says?" asked Selina in a heavy voice.

"That's all, and very interesting it is too."

"I don't think so. Are you sure she didn't say anything about Maidie and Rosie?"

"About Maidie and Rosie! No, why on earth should

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she? I don't suppose she ever gives them a moment's thought."

"Then she can't have got—" began Moira, then suddenly remembered that Miss Thompson was not supposed to know anything about Selina's letter. Luckily the governess was not taking much notice, and a brilliant move on Selina's part—"Has your father ever been to Switzerland, Miss Thompson?"—diverted her entirely.

They both wondered miserably why Mother had taken no notice of their appeal, but Maidie, when interviewed over the fence, was full of jolly reassurances.

"Why, I reckon it tääkes days and days for a letter to get to Switzerland. She wrote that letter before ever she got yourn."

"Do you think she's got mine now?"

"I dunno. I couldn't say for sure. But I hope she has, for I'm tired of being on the wrong side of this old fence."

"Oh, Maidie, I do want to play with you so."

"Maybe Mrs. English ull ask us agäun soon. Anyways, your Mother's sure to write, and then it'll be the end of my lady hop-pole and her stuck-up notions."

Maidie doubled up and rocked with laughter. The children laughed too, but more sedately. Miss Thompson seemed to them no laughing matter.

"She says she doesn't mind for herself—it's for her father."

"And wot's her father, I'd like to know? He's just another stuck-up ole hop-pole—that's all. And I don't believe he's an officer, neither. If he is, it's in the horse marines."

"What's that?"

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"Nothink at all. I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't the police."

"Oh, is he a policeman?"

Moira was impressed—to her a policeman was far more romantic and exciting than a soldier—but Selina knew better.

"I don't think he can be. She says he used to fight in India."

"Then maybe he's black. Maybe he's just a nigger."

At this they all roared. The idea of Miss Thompson's father being a nigger, with a black face and fuzzy hair and thick red lips and a sky blue suit like the niggers on the Hastings Pier seemed to them one of the funniest things they'd ever heard.

§ 7

More days passed, and then suddenly one morning Moira, who had gone down first to breakfast, called upstairs:

"Come down quick, Selina! There's a letter for you."

What ever could it be? Was it from Mother? Perhaps Mother had written to her instead of to Miss Thompson, or perhaps . . . she could not wait to button her shoe before she ran down to the sitting-room.

It was only very seldom that she received a letter, and she was always thrilled to see "Miss Selina South" on the envelope; it made her feel quite grown-up. But this letter was different from any other she had seen before. It was in a curious brownish envelope with printing on it, and it was addressed to "Selina"—no "Miss" at all. The printing at the top said: "Returned Postal Packet."

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"Who have you been writing to, Selina?" asked Miss Thompson.

Selina blushed guiltily, and yet she could not see any connection between this letter and the one she had written to Mother.

"I don't know who this is from at all."

"It's a letter of your own sent back from the dead letter office."

"Oh. . . ."

She scarcely understood yet what had happened, but she knew it was something bad.

"Open it," said Miss Thompson, "and you'll see your own letter inside."

Selina did so, and there was Rosie's mauve envelope, torn open and scrawled over with other handwriting besides her own.

"Whatever does it mean?"

"It means that you didn't address your letter properly and the post-office couldn't deliver it, so they sent it back. I'm glad you remembered to put the address inside as I showed you. . . ."

Selina sat speechless, fighting with her tears.

"You shouldn't have written it without telling me," continued Miss Thompson. "I don't like your writing letters without my knowledge, and I'm sure the spelling of this is a disgrace. That's probably why it wasn't delivered—let me see . . ." and before Selina could do anything she had leaned over and seized the envelope. "Why, it's to your mother! 'Howtel Bonny Var—Luch Ern'. . . Really, you ought to be ashamed! And only a penny stamp, too. Look what they've written on it—'Not known at Loch Earn' . . . it's been to Scotland. You silly little girl!"

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The tears broke out irresistibly. Selina was angry as well as unhappy, and frightened as well as angry.

"Miss Thompson, give it back to me"—for she was taking the letter out of the envelope.

"Certainly not. I'm going to look at the spelling ——"

"No, no! Give it to me. I don't want you to see it."

But by this time Miss Thompson had read it all. Her face turned red and there was a strange, rather dreadful look in her eyes as she looked at Selina.

"So you're naughty as well as silly! You write and complain of me to your mother behind my back—though you're too ignorant to know how to post a letter. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and when you've finished your breakfast I shall make you write out the proper address a hundred times."

"I shan't ever finish my breakfast, then," said Selina, throwing her porridge spoon on the floor.

Her feeling was that as Miss Thompson had said she was naughty when she wasn't, she might as well really be so.

"Pick up that spoon at once, Selina."

"I won't."

"Pick it up, I tell you."

"Won't."

Moirá suddenly created a diversion by throwing hers on the floor.

"So you're being naughty, too, are you?" cried Miss Thompson, who had forgotten all about her during her tussle with Selina.

"Yes. I want to play with Rosie and Maidie."

"Did you know Selina had written this disgraceful letter?"

"Yes, I did."

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"Then you shall be punished too. You shall write out the address fifty times."

"I don't know how to write."

"Then you shall print it out."

This idea appealed to Moira, and she at once became amiable, picking up her spoon and going on with her breakfast. Selina did not pick up hers till much later—not till she had reduced herself to tears again by thoughts of her own probable death by starvation if she did not eat her porridge—and it was nearly half-past nine before Miss Huggett (in all her new silence) had cleared the table.

Then Miss Thompson made them both come back and sit at it with their pencils and paper, while in front of them she laid an envelope on which she had written ——

Mrs. Edward South,
Hotel Bonnivard,
Lucerne,
Switzerland.

"Now we shall know Mother's address properly. She'll get the letter if Selina writes again," said Moira, who was sharper than her sister in many ways and than Miss Thompson in many more.

"Don't think you're being clever when you're only being rude," said the governess angrily. "Selina isn't going to write again, but she may as well learn how to address a letter."

She went out into the garden with a book. It was a lovely day, with golden sunshine in the trees and in all the garden bushes. Selina felt outraged and miserable at being kept indoors. She hadn't really been naughty

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—it wasn't naughty to write to Mother—but she was being punished just as if she had. Of course it had been naughty to throw her spoon on the floor, but Miss Thompson wasn't punishing her for that—she hadn't even added anything to her original punishment on that account. Now Nurse would have considered throwing one's spoon on the floor a punishable offence, but not writing to Mother. . . . Miss Thompson didn't know right from wrong—she was wicked and unjust and cruel and mean. . . . And now she had gone out and left them in a way Nurse would never have done. Oh, Nurse! Nurse! . . .

Selina's tears were beginning to choke her again, when suddenly Moira cried— "I've finished!"

"You can't have. I haven't begun."

"But I've finished"—and she displayed a sheet of paper covered with the grotesque capitals she called writing. She had probably copied the address some eight or nine times.

"I've finished," she continued, "and now I'm going to draw a picture of Miss Thompson's father."

"I 'spect she'll be angry."

"I mean her to. I'm going to draw him as a nigger."

Misery and outrage suddenly threw Selina's customary caution to the winds.

"And I'm going to write a piece about him, saying he's like Maidie said he was—just nothing at all. It's her fault for leaving us."

§ 8

An occasional glance through the window showed Miss Thompson, the two hair ribbons bent industriously over the table. She decided not to give them quite

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enough time to finish their task, so that if they *did* take advantage of the information she had unthinkingly supplied she would find it out at once.

They were still at work as she came into the room. "How much have you done, children?"

Moira handed her the portrait of her father, which, however, did not provoke the expected sensation, since she had, quite excusably, no idea of who or what it was meant to be.

"Moira, you've been drawing . . . oh, but I see you've been writing too . . . though that isn't fifty times or anywhere near it." However, Moira was her favourite child and she realised that a whole page filled with printed letters is quite a respectable imposition for a little girl who cannot write.

"Now let's see how much Selina has written."

Selina had written:

Miss Tomson's farther is not raly a solder or an officer he is just nuthink at all or just a comon paliceman he is a niger to and qite black in indya he is a comon man and much comoner than Maily or Rosy and he is to and she is . . .

If Selina had had time to finish and read over this composition she might have doubted the wisdom of letting Miss Thompson see anything that was so sure to make her angry. But she had been too busy with its construction to spare much thought for its effect, and now nothing could be done about it—by her at least; by Miss Thompson much was done or rather said. Her wrath exploded in a shower of monstrous words.

"You wicked girl! how dare you write such rude, disgusting trash! You must have a thoroughly per-

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verted mind to be able to think of it. I shall demand an apology from your mother for asking me to take charge of such a vulgar, ignorant child. Yes, I shall demand it. I've never been so insulted as I have since I came to you. If your parents didn't choose to have you brought up as a lady they shouldn't have engaged a gentlewoman to look after you—an officer's daughter. . . . Yes, an officer in Her Majesty's army—an officer and a gentleman ——”

Her voice rose suddenly in a kind of shriek. Both Selina and Moira were terrified. Never before had they seen a grown-up person carried away by what in themselves would have been called “temper.” They stared, their eyes round and brimming; then Selina threw over her chair and ran for the door.

Miss Thompson caught her and held her in spite of her screams.

“Yes, scream! I'll give you something to scream for. You naughty little thing! You shall be locked in your room till tea-time. Come upstairs with me.”

Selina's terrified mind caught the one word “locked” and blackness rushed upon her. Often in story-books naughty boys and girls were locked into their rooms as a punishment, and she had always shuddered sympathetically at such a dreadful fate. But she knew that it could never happen to her. Nurse had even told her that Father and Mother would not allow it. Father and Mother and Nurse never made her do anything she was really frightened of. But now Father and Mother and Nurse were all of them far away, and here she was alone and helpless in the power of Miss Thompson, who didn't care how frightened she was. . . . She sank upon the ground.

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"Oh, don't! don't! please don't! I shall die if you do."

"Nonsense! of course you won't. And the sooner you find out that you won't die as easily as you think you will the better—" and Miss Thompson tried to pull her to her feet, but Selina clung to the table-leg with despairing yells.

"You'll have to get over your terror of locked doors some day so it may as well be now," continued the governess, seeking some moral entrenchment for herself as her anger failed. "You can't go through all your life with the bathroom door open."

"But I'll die if you lock the door! Oh please, Miss Thompson, I'm sorry I was rude about your father, and if you'll only *shut* the door I'll promise not to open it."

"No, I certainly don't trust you any more after what's happened this morning. Come upstairs at once."

But Selina clung desperately to the table-leg.

"Help! help!" she screamed. "I want Mother! . . . Father! Mother! Nurse!" and Moira chimed in "Nurse! Nurse! I want Nurse."

In the midst of the uproar a carriage drove up in front of the house. Only Miss Thompson was in a position to see it.

"Be quiet!" she exclaimed. "There's somebody coming to the farm. Stop screaming at once, or they'll hear you."

Miss Thompson obviously did not understand the chief purpose of screaming; nevertheless both little girls were suddenly quiet. Moira looked out of the window.

"It's Father and Mother," she said.

Of course neither of the others believed her. They

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both knew that Father and Mother were hundreds of miles away and that Moira was only a little girl who was liable to see them in every passing carriage.

"Nonsense!" said the governess. "It's only someone come to buy something or to ask about rooms."

"No, it's Father and Mother. I can see Jenner, and I can see the horses, and ——"

She was interrupted by the loudest shriek Selina had given yet. She had at that moment looked up from the floor and seen Father and Mother come in at the garden gate.

§ 9

Selina said afterwards that it was all exactly like an answer to prayer; though the resemblance would have been closer if she had remembered to pray even once in the stresses of her battle with Miss Thompson. Certainly it looked as if Father and Mother had been dropped straight out of heaven by a miracle—unless by some chance, equally miraculous, Mother had caught a glimpse of Selina's letter as it whirled through Switzerland on its way to Scotland. . . . Actually she had come in response to a letter from Mrs. English, who had not been at all happy about the way things were going at Platnix and had remembered her promise to Mrs. South. Father and Mother had called at the Rectory on their way to the farm, and had arranged, they said, for the children to go there to dinner that day.

This was something quite new, as hitherto they had never been to the Rectory except to tea.

"Are Maidie and Rosie going too?" asked Moira.

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"Oh, no, I don't think so."

"But we *may* play with them when we come home, mayn't we, Mother?" said Selina with a glance towards Miss Thompson, who at once began:

"Selina has been a very naughty little girl. . . ."

"No, Mother, I haven't—I only wrote to you to ask if we might play with Maidie."

Mother told her not to interrupt, but it soon became apparent, among the many strangenesses of the situation, that she and Father were on her side against Miss Thompson, though of course they said it was very naughty of her to have written what she did about Miss Thompson's father.

"I drew a picture of him too," said Moira, proudly displaying it.

"Tear it up at once," said Mother, "and then put on your sunbonnets. Father's going to take you to the Rectory."

It was all very odd; nobody even remembered that they hadn't washed their hands. Father took them across to the village by the fields, and as they passed the carriage in the drive they saw Jenner and Jarman lifting luggage out of it.

"Oh, Father! there's your box! are you going to stay at Platnix?"

"I daresay we shall for a while."

"Why?" asked Moira.

"Is it to see that Miss Thompson looks after us properly?" asked Selina.

Father said:

"Never you mind

Said old Mrs. Blinde"

which was his way of ending a conversation.

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At the Rectory they found there was nothing to eat but cold mutton and rice pudding, two things Selina hated.

"I'm sorry it's such a dull dinner, dears," said Mrs. English, "but I didn't know you were coming till it was too late to order anything nicer."

"Didn't you ask us?" said Moira.

"No; it was your Mother who asked if you might come. She thought it much better not to have you about while—but she'd rather tell you all that herself when you get back."

"Oh, do tell us, Mrs. English. Is it a treat?"

"No, I'm not going to tell you. I promised I wouldn't."

Selina was all agog with excitement.

"I guess it's a pony," she said. It struck her as quite delightfully probable that Father and Mother had brought her back a pony from Switzerland.

§ 10

But once again it was not a pony. In fact this new surprise bore a strong resemblance to that other one of a month ago, for it too concerned Miss Thompson. But today they were much better pleased. Miss Thompson's arrival had had many defects as a treat; her departure had none. When they found out that she was gone, both little girls shouted and danced for joy.

"Hooray! now we can play with Rosie and Maidie."
... "Hooray! Hooray! oh heavenly rapture! How wonderful and glorious! I can hardly bear it!" ...

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"Mother, can we have tea with Mistern-Missus Huggett?"

"Yes, you're going to have tea with them this afternoon."

"Hooray! I wish I hadn't torn up that picture of Miss Thompson's father. I want to show it to Maidie."

"Hush! It was very wrong of you to make fun of him."

"Is he really an officer?" asked Selina, "or is he just a policeman?"

"He's really an officer—a retired Captain. But," she could not help adding, "that was no reason for her objecting to bathing you."

"Mother, why did she go? Is her father dead?"

"Oh, dear me, no. But Father and I thought we'd like to take care of you at Platnix ourselves."

"Are *you* going to look after us, then?"

"We'll do our best," said Father—"and Miss Huggett will help us, no doubt."

"I like having Miss Huggett bathe me," said Moira.

"Will she sleep with us too?" asked Selina hopefully.

"No," said Mother. "I shall sleep in Miss Thompson's bed, and Father will sleep in the little room Baa has when she's here."

"And are you going to stay with us the whole time—till we go back to Hastings?"

"Yes, the whole time."

It was not till many years later that the children appreciated the truly heroic virtue of their parents in giving up a holiday in Switzerland to live in cramped farmhouse lodgings, eat farmhouse meals which were no better than such meals usually are, sleep in farmhouse beds which were apparently stuffed with old

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birds' nests and chucks of wood, and look after two nervous, excitable, exacting and exhausting little girls. All they realised at the time was that though having Father and Mother with them at Platnix was not nearly as nice as having Nurse it was very much nicer than having Miss Thompson.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Our Touch with the Great Nation

“ . . . Our touch with the Great Nation not having much improved our condition . . . ”

Persuasion (Jane Austen)

§ I

NEITHER OF THE CHILDREN WAS PARTICULARLY INTERESTED in the French language. That Spring and early Summer, Mother had engaged Madame Stubberfield, newly come from Rouen to marry Mr. Stubberfield of the china shop, to walk and talk with them in the Markwick Gardens for half an hour three times a week. The tongue of Molière, Racine and Corneille was associated in their minds with the damp, laurel-hedged path behind the swinghouse, with a curious, dreary strolling motion, quite unlike either Nurse's brisk walk or their own less staid but no less rapid progress, and with such questions and answers, frequently repeated, as “Comment vous portez-vous?” — “Très bien, merci” — or “Où est votre chapeau?” — “Sur ma tête.”

It certainly was all very dull, especially as they had

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a feeling that Madame Stubberfield disliked teaching them as much as they disliked being taught; so their hearts sank a little when Mother told them one day soon after their return from Platnix that she had engaged a French maid to come and look after them instead of Nurse.

"Oh, Mother, *when* will Nurse come back?" wailed Selina.

"If she doesn't come soon," said Moira, "I'll ask if I can go and live with her."

"And desert poor Father and Mother?"

Mother put on a sad face, but Moira answered stoutly:

"You'd soon get used to not having me, and I can't get used to not having Nurse."

"But if you had somebody just as nice as Nurse ——"

"There *isn't* anybody just as nice as Nurse."

"Well, I've been told that this French maid is very nice indeed."

"You said Miss Thompson was nice," said Selina reproachfully.

"Miss Thompson *was* quite nice, but she wasn't the right sort of person for you and Moira, as she was more a governess than a Nurse. This French girl isn't a governess at all. She's what they call a 'bonne' in France."

"Is that the same as a Nurse?"

"Yes, very much the same."

"Will she talk French to us?" cried Selina in sudden alarm.

"Certainly she will. In fact she'll talk nothing else; because——" and Mother laughed merrily "—she doesn't

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understand any English. So you'll have to learn French quickly."

Selina's alarm deepened to panic.

"Mother, how shall I let her know . . . oh, tell me quick! what's 'don't turn on the waste-pipe' in French."

"I'll explain everything to her"—feeling that perhaps she might be able to with the help of Baa. "Now, don't get in a state, Selina. I'll see that everything's all right."

"Because it'll be simply awful if she doesn't know how to do things properly and we aren't able to tell her."

"You'll learn how to do that quite soon, I hope."

"But I must know how to do it at once. Mother, don't you think Madame Stubberfield might come up and give us just a few lessons before she arrives?"

Mother thought it a very good suggestion, though she was rather surprised at its coming from such a quarter, and Madame Stubberfield was equally surprised at some of the words and phrases for which Selina demanded the exact French equivalent.

§ 2

It was Mrs. Craig who had suggested that Mother should engage a French *bonne* to supplant Nurse in her children's too faithful hearts.

"If she's quite different, they won't always be making comparisons," she argued sensibly if obscurely, "and you told me you were anxious for them to speak French before they went to school."

"Yes, I want them to have a good accent, and it's almost impossible to get that unless you begin quite early. That's why I engaged Madame Stubberfield

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. . . but they don't seem to be getting on with her very fast."

"Because she can talk English. You should engage someone who can't speak a word."

"Won't that be rather hard on the children?"

"Only just at first. They'll soon pick it up. Baa will help them. It would be nice if she could join them on their walks and rub up her own French a little."

Mother thought it over and talked it over. French was a tradition in her family, and the fact that she spoke it only haltingly herself was due to an English reaction on the part of her parents and also to a code of female dependence which made her, when she travelled in France, leave all arrangements, arguments and explanations to her husband who spoke no French at all. The present time certainly seemed ideal for putting into action a plan that she had always vaguely cherished. She would never have dared send away Nurse and introduce a Frenchwoman, but as Nurse was gone—alas! probably gone forever—she might as well get what good she could out of the catastrophe.

After her experience with Miss Thompson, she took special trouble to find a girl who was really fond of children, and, though eminently respectable, without any burdensome gentility. Marguerite Olier was the daughter of a small dressmaker, and came to England with the enthusiastic recommendation of an English family in Paris, who knew the mother and were anxious to see her daughter well placed. She was a plump, honest, round-faced girl, with a fresh, innocent complexion—totally unlike the typical Frenchwoman of British imagination either simple or cynical. The first night at Senlac Lodge she cried herself to sleep—merci-

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fully unheard by the children; the next morning she was romping with them wildly round the flower-beds in the Markwick Gardens.

"Oh, Mother, it's lovely having Marguerite!" cried Selina, bursting into the dining-room while her parents were at lunch. "She's such fun to play with, even though we can't understand what she says. She runs about for us to catch her and screams quite loud. And when Froggy came out and told her she mustn't jump over the flower-beds she made such a funny face."

Mother could not help being pleased to see her little girl so happy, even though she did not approve of the whole of this communication. The children certainly seemed to like their *bonne* and though wails still occasionally came from the nursery they were no louder or more frequent than they had been in Nurse's day. As for those small incidents that pointed to the fact that Marguerite was herself very young, they were comparatively unimportant, and apart from them she seemed quite trustworthy. Selina and Moira were washed, dressed, given their meals and taken for walks almost as capably as by Nurse and much more capably than by Miss Thompson. There was really nothing to complain of, unless it was the photograph on the nursery mantelpiece of Monsieur Léon Lavalley of the Chasseurs d'Afrique.

At first Mother had thought he was a brother, and it was Selina herself who informed her that he was going to marry Marguerite when he had finished his military service.

"He's her *pioupiou*, you know; and she kisses his photograph every morning and every night."

Mother was shocked, and took her first opportunity

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of saying "Il no faut pas parler de ces choses devant les enfants."

Marguerite burst into a torrent of French, and as it flowed over, her Mother comforted herself with the thought that such incomprehensible communications were not likely to corrupt Selina's good manners to any serious extent.

§ 3

But she undervalued her daughter's abilities. Both children picked up French with remarkable quickness and were soon talking it freely. This may have been partly due to the fact that Marguerite herself, in spite of strenuous efforts, failed to learn even the rudiments of English—to the end of her stay she was unable to say more than "Watterclokeesit?" in the toneless voice of a somnambulist. But the main incentive to learn French undoubtedly lay in the enchanted realm to which it was the key. Long after Selina had made safe for herself a world of pipes and plugs, she continued to follow the lure of Monsieur Léon Laval, of l'Enfant Martyre, of La Katrine, of La Sainte Vierge and a host of other characters and communications that made Trimmer and Pearl and the Kind-Friends seem dull and childish in comparison.

Unlike Nurse, Marguerite scarcely ever stopped talking, and she was always telling you something interesting. It was interesting to hear all about "mon petit Léon," and how he would be back from Africa in two years, by which time Marguerite hoped to have saved some money. And when they really wanted excitement they asked her to tell them about l'Enfant

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Martyre—that poor little boy whose Father had been tried by the French courts for barbarously ill-treating him. As Marguerite described his sufferings the tears would well out of her eyes and run down her full-moon face, and there was nothing strange or frightening in those tears as there had been in Nurse's, but rather they were a part of the story, making it more real and alive. Then there was La Sainte Vierge, who turned out to be the Virgin Mary, only very much more exciting; and last and most entertaining of all there was La Katrine.

La Katrine, whose original name was Martha, represented a late-Victorian attempt at artistic toymaking. She was a rag doll and her features were handpainted instead of being moulded in wax. Selina and Moira hated and despised her and called her Martha out of sheer contempt. She was considered unworthy of admittance to the Lodge and lay about the nursery, generally naked. It was in this plight that Marguerite found her.

"Ah!" she cried. "Ah, la pauvre Katrine!"

Moira and Selina told her that her name was Martha, and Marguerite said that was a name to sleep out of doors with. She picked the doll up in her arms and pretended to love her. "Ah!" she cried again, "*la pauvre! personne ne l'aime. Alors! elle sera ma poupée à moi.*"

It was immediately agreed that Martha—or rather, now, La Katrine—was to be Marguerite's doll. As such she acquired a new status in the nursery—indeed it was not very long before she was admitted to the Lodge. Marguerite made her a dress out of an old

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check duster which she insisted was "une robe écossaise" and by the time she had been fitted out with a bonnet and a complete set of underclothes she looked considerably smarter than any of the other inmates of that establishment. When ever she had a moment's leisure Marguerite picked up la Katrine; in fact they once thought of making her into a third Kind Friend. But this was really too great a breach with tradition even for these exciting new times, and it was decided that she should simply be La Katrine's mother on those rare occasions when she was not being La Katrine herself.

As for La Katrine, Selina said that it was strange to think how for weeks they had hated her for being dull and ugly; and here she was, the most interesting person in the Lodge. Ever since she had become Marguerite's doll her personality had developed in a way both fascinating and astonishing. She was the Lodge's naughty girl—and how naughty! The peccadilloes of Tiny and Topsy, of Rosamund and Peeler, and the two Fleascratchers, were poor milk-and-water things compared with La Katrine's robust wickedness. Under her influence certain inhibitions disappeared not only from the Lodge but from the nursery; words that were forbidden in English could apparently be spoken freely in French, in which language also actions could be expressed that in English could not be even thought of.

Marguerite had no idea of a doll's life being like an angel's, and those omissions in the daily routine of their charges which hitherto modesty had dictated to the Kind Friends, were now sensationally restored. Mother would have been shocked if she had known

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the realism, not to say the naturalism, that had invaded the Lodge; but the children felt no qualms of conscience—considering themselves in an entirely new world where ordinary rules did not apply. They had enough sense, however, to leave that world behind them when they went into the drawing-room, and to realise that the English language must always be the language of decorum, whatever privileges were allowed in French.

There was another point on which they kept silence—on which, indeed, it did not occur to them to speak—and that was Marguerite's habit of hitting them when she was angry. She was often angry, as Nurse had hardly ever been; but somehow her anger was not impressive like Nurse's, and certainly it was never frightening like Miss Thompson's. It was more like the anger of someone of their own age, and she hit them in the same way as they occasionally hit each other. Nurse, of course, had never hit them, but they did not object to Marguerite's occasional delivery of what she called "*une bonne claque*," especially since the privilege of hitting back was understood. She never hurt very much, as she generally missed the part of them she was aiming at, and soon the scene dissolved in laughter and good will.

Only sometimes did Selina experience a queer, lost sensation, as if one was trying to lean against a wall and it wasn't there. She missed that grown-up wall which had always stood so firmly in the nursery, and though a wall is hard as well as sustaining, and certainly no fun to play with, she could not occasionally help feeling that she would sacrifice many of her present freedoms for a few of the old supports.

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§ 4

It was Madame Stubberfield who opened Mother's eyes to a part at least of what was going on. She may have been glad to expose the woman who had relieved her of her bi-weekly strollings in the Markwick Gardens, for though she had not even pretended to enjoy them, they had meant a little pin-money and independence. Great efforts had been made to bring her and Marguerite together as much as possible, but strangers in a foreign land, though always supposed to crave for each other's company, often do so as little as cats or small children, and certainly Madame Stubberfield saw no reason why she should be friends with Marguerite just because they both happened to be French.

"Why, in my home, in Rouen, that girl would be washing my dishes!" she remarked indignantly to her husband. To Mrs. South she said:

"It is really only right to tell you, Madame, that she does not teach them polite French—not French as it is spoken by well-brought-up people. Some of her expressions are quite—how shall I say?—*grossière*. And the children use them too. I heard them only yesterday upon the Front."

"Oh, dear," sighed Mother, "that's a very great pity. Of course, I'm at a disadvantage, as I don't understand French really well."

"I don't say it is anything very much—but there is too much *argot*—slang you call it; I hear Moira say 'je m'en fiche' which isn't pretty for a little girl."

"Well, I'll speak to Marguerite about it. She's a very

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nice girl in many ways. She sews beautifully, and the children love her."

"Oh yes," said Madame Stubberfield.

Mother went home and waited for what she considered a suitable occasion to tell Marguerite that she wanted the children taught only the very best French.

"Pas d'argot," she insisted, "mais gentil, comme les dames. Esker vous pouvez les apprendre des petits poesies . . . ?"

Marguerite listened meekly if a little sullenly, but when she was back in the nursery she burst out.

"Ah, voilà votre maman qui me gronde. Elle veut que je vous apprenne 'des petits poésies' . . ." and here followed a realistic imitation of poor Mother's French accent. "C'est cette maudite Madame Stoobairefield qui nous suit dans la ville comme un chat et rapporte tout à votre maman. . . . Elle lui dit que vous parlez comme des voyous—elle qui parle comme une Normande . . . ouain, ouain—" and Marguerite gave what she considered an equally successful imitation of Madame Stubberfield.

Selina and Moira did not quite understand what was wrong; they only knew that Marguerite was very angry. A measure of enlightenment came after tea, when, according to custom, they went down to the drawing-room.

"I want you to play in French today," said Mother. "I never hear you talk it as I should like to."

It had suddenly struck her as incredible that she shouldn't be able to understand her own children; she would notice any strange words they said and demand a translation.

Selina and Moira were only too glad to oblige and

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show off their French. Accordingly halma was started in that language. But Mother soon interrupted.

"Moira, you're not to say that."

"Say what?"

"'Oh, mon Dieu!' and 'Oh, la, la!'"

"Oh, Mother, why not?"

"Because, 'Oh, mon Dieu!' means 'Oh, my God!' and 'Oh, la! la!' means 'Oh, Lord! Lord!'"

Moira had known the first, but the second was news to her. However, she took Mother's word for it, merely asking:

"Why mustn't I say 'Oh, my God!'"

"Because it's swearing."

"Swearing!" Both little girls were tremendously excited; they hadn't even known that they *could* swear.

"Yes, it's taking God's name in vain, and it's not at all nice. You must say something different."

"What shall we say?"

Alas! Mother could not tell them.

"I'll ask Madame Stubberfield what the French for 'Oh dear!' is. Meanwhile you must just say 'Oh!'"

This conversation was of course reported to Marguerite, who flung up her eyes to heaven, clenched her fists against her sides, and cried: "Ah! Maintenant c'est défendu d'invoquer le Bon Dieu!"—adding some trenchant criticisms of the religion of Northern France, where according to her all the inhabitants were "librepenseurs" and "franc-maçons."

The children were genuinely perturbed. Never before had there been any difference of opinion between the drawing-room and the nursery, and it was a little disconcerting to have Marguerite railing and exclaim-

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ing against Mother, with whom she insisted on linking Madame Stoobarefield, and threatening one minute to go back to France and the next to teach them some language that was really bad for a change.

They begged her to take the latter course.

"Oh, Marguerite, teach us something that's really bad—bad in French." For of course words that were forbidden in English, such as *beast* and *stomach*, in French made no sensation at all.

Marguerite pondered, her anger at once diverted. She was not really so expert in bad language as she had made out in her first heat, but after some cogitation she announced that there was one word so dreadful that you could never actually use it, but had to say "*mot-de-cinq-lettres*" instead.

The children, of course, wanted to know what it was, but she absolutely refused to go further, and told them that if they so much as said "*mot-de-cinq-lettres*" in her presence they would receive "*une bonne claque*." Of course they said it, and of course she tried to give them what she had promised. Bedtime that night was particularly noisy.

§ 5

Mother, basing her opinion on her memories of school, imagined all Frenchwomen to be full of "*des petits poésies*" and found it hard to believe that Marguerite had not a single recitation in her. She returned again and again to the attack, demanding that the children should be taught something. Why, even, when they were only beginning with Madame Stub-

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berfield they had learned "un, deux, trois, j'irai dans les bois"; and now of course they could manage something much more advanced.

Marguerite was not going to admit to Mrs. South that she was in any way inferior to Madame Stubberfield, but she lamented long and loudly to the children of this new and unthinkable call upon her.

"Votre maman croit que je sais tout. Alors! elle devrait me payer d'avantage. Qu'est-ce qu'elle me donne?—trente francs par mois. Et pour cela elle demande un professeur! Je ne suis qu'une pauvre fille, loin de mon pays et de mon bien-aimé"—her eyes filling with tears as they rolled towards the photograph on the mantelpiece—"Ah, mon petit Léon, qu'est-ce que tu dirais maintenant si tu pouvais voir ta Marguerite?"

The situation continued tense till it was finally relieved by La Katrine.

That evening at the Lodge she was made to dance and give an entertainment in the course of which she sang several songs. Selina and Moira liked her songs and at once proceeded to learn them; it was then that they discovered they were reciting poetry.

"Marguerite, if we sing La Katrine's songs, Mother will be pleased."

"Oh no, they are only children's songs. She asks for 'Fables de la Fontaine' and 'Poèmes Choises'."

"But I'm sure she'll like these. We'll learn them for her birthday. . . . Oh, Marguerite! Marguerite!"—bursting with a sudden, fine new inspiration—"let's give an entertainment in French."

This was a splendid idea, for they had been wonder-

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ing what they could do this year for Mother's birthday without Nurse as stage-manager. And the solution of their problem included Marguerite's. She was more than well pleased with it, and all her old resentments died away as she plunged as eagerly as either of them into the needful preparations.

It was arranged to have a programme of French songs, sung in character by Moira and Selina, and a formal birthday address by La Katrine. This last was Marguerite's own idea, and she at once proceeded to make the doll an entirely new set of clothes. Two lace-trimmed handkerchiefs were sacrificed for a white gown, and a wreath of flowers was sewn with a white veil on to her head. The tears came into Marguerite's eyes as she surveyed her.

"On dirait qu'elle est habillée pour sa première communion."

Of course the whole thing was to be a secret, and it was a pity that the secret could not be kept, because directly it slipped off Moira's tongue Mother conceived the happy thought of asking Madame Stubberfield to attend. Her experience last year with Mrs. Rivers had not taught her the wisdom of keeping their entertainments within the family circle; moreover she was anxious to have the children's French really certified and approved of.

§ 6

The performance began with a song by Selina dressed in her party-frock and crowned with a wreath of Virginia creeper.

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"A quoi me sert d'être gentil,
Puisque je suis si petite fille?
La fleur ne brille qu'au printemps—
Que je voudrais avoir seize ans!"

This sentimental ditty, sung slightly out of tune in a thread-like voice, was as mystifying to Selina as to the majority of her audience. But it received enough applause to justify the encore she was bursting to give.

"Dites-moi, petite maman,
Les p'tits bateaux
Qui vont sur l'eau
Out-ils des jambes?"

"Mais oui, grosse bête;
S'ils n'en avaient pas,
Ils ne marcheraient pas."

"Eh bien, petite maman,
Puisque je suis une bête,
On dit que les enfants
Ressemblent à leurs parents."

She knew that Nurse would not have approved of this song, but in French a different standard of morality prevailed, and Selina expected her audience to realise it. She bowed low and withdrew, well pleased with her reception.

Moira took her place in her sleeping suit and a bowler hat, obviously a man.

"Le docteur de mon village
Est un medecin fameux . . . "

If Selina's voice was like a thread, Moira's was like

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a saw. Poor Mrs. South, who was musical, suffered acutely during the eight verses that described the doctor's precept of water-drinking and his practice of a different kind. There was a chorus after each verse, in which the thread invisibly joined with the saw:

"C'est le sang qui vous agite,
La sang seul, cruel fléau.
Rafrichissez-le bien vite
Croyez moi—buvez de l'eau!"

But the torment of Mother's ears was nothing to the torment of her eyes as they gazed at Madame Stubberfield. It was on her face that she hoped to read the success of the entertainment. But all she saw on that face was a glare—the glare of two hard blue eyes above a mouth which was scarcely more than a line. It was always difficult to read a foreigner's expression, but certainly Madame Stubberfield's did not express pleasure. She wondered what was wrong. Her own French was not enough to tell her much, though she caught several words that seemed to her out of place in a "petit poésie." Were these songs all right? She had imagined that the first had expressed a totally strange desire on the part of Selina to grow up and to be made love to by young men with big soft eyes. And the second had certainly contained the expression "grosse bête," and surely the doctor in the present song had drunk too much. . . . Moira dissolved into fat laughter as she described how he fell into a river and was drowned.

The thread and the saw rasped together for the last chorus; and then Moira, without even waiting for applause, burst out with her encore.

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“Le grand singe de l’Amérique,
Qui demeurerait à Plombino,
Fut saisi d’une colique
Qui s’échappa subitot!”

Mother did not have to look at Madame Stubberfield to learn that this was not a nice “poésie.”

“Moir, who taught you that?”

“Marguerite. It’s my favourite song.”

“Well, I don’t like it. What comes next?”

Next, fortunately, came La Katrine, in a polite and softened mood appropriate to her changed appearance. Marguerite introduced her and recited her speech of birthday greetings, in which every charming sentiment was charmingly uttered. She had the Frenchwoman’s power of expressing herself delightfully if she chose, and the occasion reminded her of the prize days at the Convent, and the “déclamation” which she had once given, after careful coaching, in front of all the assembled parents and nuns. At the end of La Katrine’s speech she presented Mother with a bunch of chrysanthemums which was Marguerite’s own gift. Mother was delighted. This was just the sort of thing she liked on her birthday—nice, polite, and kind; and she had understood enough to feel clever. It is true that Madame Stubberfield still glared, but that was reassuring rather than otherwise, since in this case she obviously had nothing to glare at, so that one had to think either that she disliked poor Marguerite or that a glare was her natural expression.

Now that everything was over, Mother asked to see La Katrine, and admired her beautifully sewn garments. The children were of course glad to show her off and to chatter of her new powers and performances.

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"She's really only that awful old rag doll Aunt Sissie gave us," said Moira, "but Marguerite's taken her for her own and made her all sorts of lovely dresses. She's got a green dress with brown flowers on it."

"And almost every evening elle fait la comédie to the Lodge," said Selina. "She makes the comedy, you know."

"Talk French, children," said Mother. "I want Madame Stubberfield to hear you talk French."

Selina at once addressed Madame Stubberfield, and began to tell her about La Katrine and how amusing she was. Moira chuckled at a remembered joke.

"Hier soir, maman," she began, and proceeded to tell how La Katrine had been very naughty. Her Mother had sent her out to buy an iced cake, and she had stopped to play on the way home and knocked all the decorations off. She was afraid to go home with the cake as it was, so what do you think she did, Mother? "Elle a ramassé des crottes de chien et elle les a mis sur le gâteau comme garniture."

"Really, dear. How funny! but I don't quite understand. What are crottes de chien?"

Then Moira suddenly remembered that she was talking to Mother in the drawing-room. She had mixed up the two worlds of French and English and perhaps something dreadful would happen. . . . She turned crimson.

"I don't know."

"Then what's the joke?"

"I don't know."

Moira's manner was enough in itself to generate

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suspicion, and to make suspicion a certainty Madame Stubberfield spoke.

"But I know, Madame."

She must have been listening to Moira all the while she was talking to Selina, for her glare was now absolutely ferocious. She leaned forward and whispered in Mother's ear.

Mother started and flushed. Then she looked quite angry. However, all she said was:

"That will do for tonight, children. It's past your bed-time. Say good-night to everyone and run upstairs."

It was her birthday, so she would not scold them; and of course they were not half so much to blame as Marguerite, though it was sad to think what a ready ear they must have lent to corruption.

§ 7

Moira's uneasiness soon passed and Selina did not even realise what had happened. Upstairs they found Marguerite triumphant at the evening's success in general and La Katrine's in particular, and they all chattered happily together while she put them to bed. They did not know that anything was wrong—not even when, after they were in bed, they heard Mother call Marguerite to come downstairs. It was not the first time that there had been such a summons, and they suspected nothing till she came up again. Then there could be no mistake.

Selina had just sunk into a pleasant dream of La Katrine, Trimmer and herself all taking part in the Hastings Pier Pantomime, when she was wakened by

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Marguerite stumping upstairs as if she had wooden legs. She stumped straight into the night nursery, where she turned up the gas into a screaming flame. Then she burst out:

"Alors! C'est fini! Je n'en peux plus! Je pars tout de suite!"

And she dragged out from under her bed the large yellow tin box that had come with her from Paris.

"Marguerite! Marguerite! Qu'est-ce que tu as?—où vas-tu?"

The two little heads shot up, Moira whimpering.

"C'est cette sale Stooobairefield qui vient encore de me démentir, et votre Mère qui fait le Shoking sur moi. . . . Non, non, je n'en peux plus—j'ai assez souffert," and she burst into a storm of crying.

"Marguerite! Oh, j'ai peur! j'ai peur!"— "Nurse, Nurse, I want Nurse!"

Selina and Moira each made her own contribution to the din, and Mother came running upstairs, to find the three occupants of the night nursery all crying noisily. Marguerite certainly did not "cry like a grown-up person"; she sat on her bed, roaring with her mouth wide open, her round face blubbered with tears. The children sat up, roaring too, but Marguerite roared the loudest.

Mother scarcely knew how to cope with such a situation.

"Taisez-vous!" was all she could cry out. "Taisez-vous."

But Marguerite's only response to this was to join a flood of speech to a flood of tears; she managed to cry and talk at the same time in a way that one would never have thought possible.

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Oh, was ever a poor girl so persecuted, so insulted? Behold her among strangers and freemasons who told lies about her and abused her and ill-treated her. She had worked like a slave, and her only reward was Shoking, Shoking. Ah ces sals Anglais! Ah cette sale Stoobairefield! She would endure no more. She would go back to France—at once! but at once! She had finished. She could no more. She would go back to her poor Mother and to her poor little well-beloved . . . and dashing into the next room she snatched his photograph off the mantelpiece and threw it into her trunk as the foundation of her packing.

Poor Mother! never before had there been such a scene in the nursery, and the fact that it had to be dealt with in the French language made her feel more than usually inadequate.

“Vous pouvez pas partir maintenant. Il faut rester un mois. Vous avez un mois de notice,” she lumbered out.

Marguerite’s reply swept over her like a torrent, in which a few intelligible words floated here and there like spars . . . “fini . . . partir . . . ce soir . . . maintenant . . . assez . . . jamais . . . partir . . . tout d’suite. . . .”

“Vous pouvez pas partir. Pas de train. Pas de batto. Un mois de notice—vous comprenez—le notice d’un mois.”

Thus Mother valiantly tried to stem the flood, and the children supported her with desperate cries and entreaties to Marguerite not to desert them. She answered that she was sorry to leave the poor little ones who only searched to distract themselves, mais pour ces autres . . . she was finished . . . she was away

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... and with a final gesture she banged down the lid of her trunk, which contained nothing but the photograph of her petit Léon.

There was only one thing to be done in a Victorian household.

"Je vais appelly Monsieur."

Monsieur, of course, like everyone else in the house, must hear what was going on, but no doubt, like a man, he was trying to pretend he didn't. Mother determined that he should come out of his refuge and take his part in the fray. She ran out on the landing.

"Ted!" she called frantically. "Ted!"

He could no longer pretend that he did not hear the commotion that rocked the house. Reluctantly he took his feet off the fender, put down his *Lancet* and went up to the night nursery.

Here he found his wife hoarsely commanding Marguerite to "restez ici." Marguerite, wearing her hat and jacket, stood beside her closed trunk and loudly summoned to her aid all the chief inhabitants of heaven. Selina sat up in bed, wailing like a lost wind, while Moira, whom terror and grief had carried on to rage, jumped wildly up and down in her cot, shouting "Mot d'cinq lettres! mot d'cinq lettres!" entirely unappreciated.

You might have thought that Father, who did not speak a word of French, would have been even more useless than Mother in dealing with such a situation. But it was not in vain that he had struggled with the porters of half a dozen European railways, changed tickets, traced lost luggage, argued with hotel managers and customs officials, and even attended a lady taken ill on the Basle express, without ever feeling

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the need of any language but his own. That language did not fail him now, and without using any other, he managed to convince Marguerite of the folly of setting out for France so late at night when there was neither boat nor train, and with no luggage except her young man's photograph in an empty tin trunk. By some mysterious means he persuaded her to take off her outdoor clothes, push back her trunk under the bed and accept "un mois de notice." It took him scarcely more than seven minutes to establish perfect peace in the nursery.

Soon all its three occupants were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion. Father, too, might sleep soundly with the consciousness of duty done. Only Mother lay awake, wondering whom on earth she could get to follow Marguerite in Nurse's empty place and if it was possible for her at the third attempt to fail even worse than she had failed already.

§ 8

The next day did not bring relief, for she discovered to her despair and amazement that the children could not bear the thought of Marguerite leaving them.

"Oh, Mother, I shall die if she goes!" This of course was Selina.

"I like her nearest to Nurse out of anyone we've had." Thus Moira suggested an even longer trail of failures.

"But, darlings, you surely want someone who'll take care of you properly and not frighten you with these dreadful scenes."

"I wasn't really frightened of her," said Selina, "not

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like I was with Miss Thompson; and I don't believe anyone will ever take care of us properly except Nurse."

This seemed to Mrs. South absolutely pathetic.

"I'll get you a real old-fashioned Nanna this time, who'll sit by the fire and knit."

"Oh, that would be dull! I don't think I should like that. Mother, I don't want an old-fashioned Nanna. I want someone to play with us like Marguerite."

"But Nurse hardly ever played with you."

"I know, but she was Nurse. I couldn't bear someone who wasn't Nurse not playing with us. . . . Oh, do let Marguerite stay till Nurse comes back! Mother! Mother! You don't think Nurse will *never* come back, do you?"

Selina burst into tears and Mother nearly did the same. Even when she had quieted them on the subject of Nurse, there was still Marguerite to deal with.

"Mother, please, please let her stay."

"But I don't suppose she wants to stay after what's happened."

"Oh yes she does. She says her Mother won't keep her at home all the time till she's married, and would only send her out again to an even worse place. And, besides, she's saving money to get married with. She must have at least a thousand francs or Léon's father won't let him marry her.

"Really, Selina, I don't like your hearing about these things. It isn't at all nice for a little girl, and I'll certainly get you a good old-fashioned Nanna."

Sobs and tears followed which were silenced only by distance, that is to say by the children being sent back to the nursery.

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The next few days were not any less exhausting. Selina and Moira did nothing but cry and implore, while from the nursery proceeded constantly sounds of weeping mingled with adjuration. Marguerite joined her own entreaties with the children's, both explicitly in interviews in which she supplicated Madame to pardon her and have pity on her and implicitly by means of a pattern of roses and forget-me-nots which appeared mysteriously round the collars of all Mrs. South's nightgowns.

In the end it was decided to give her another chance. Mother and Father talked the matter over many times and came to the conclusion that the children must be really fond of Marguerite. She certainly kept them happy and amused, and—though Mother felt she ought not to be influenced by this—they looked very much better dressed than in Nurse's day. As for the low words and phrases they had picked up, Mother would talk to her seriously about that. No doubt, too, Madame Stubberfield had exaggerated . . . she had made it plain that she did not like her supplanter. And that old-fashioned nanna showed no signs of materialising either at the registry office or at any of the houses of their friends.

So Mother summoned Marguerite to the drawing-room and—after careful rehearsal, and some coaching from Baa, who knew more French than anyone outside the nursery—told her that she could stay, on condition that she did not let the children use any vulgar expressions or discuss things that were suitable only to grown-up people.

Marguerite wept and thanked Madame with her whole heart and promised that all in future should

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be well—indeed, perfect. Then she skipped upstairs to tell the children, and amidst shrieks of delight La Katrine was taken from the cupboard where she had lain all through those dreadful days when no one could look at her without crying, and put uproariously through her paces. Marguerite was Mrs. South with a vocabulary limited practically to “Oh yes” and “Shoking,” while La Katrine was Marguerite, promising with the sweetness and dignity of a martyr to refrain from ever again mentioning either love or the lavatory. It was all very funny, touching and delightful, and the children could scarcely have been happier if Nurse had come back again.

§ 9

The next week or two passed peacefully enough. Marguerite really did her best to carry out her share of the contract, that is, if ever she said anything she thought Mrs. South would disapprove of she at once cried out “Shoking!” and laughed uproariously. The children took care more effectively, because they really knew what Mother did not like and why; they realised that after all there was only one rule for the worlds of French and English. They were still happy and interested, though now the first delight of Marguerite’s reprieve was past, Selina began to feel unsupported again, began again to miss that nursery wall of authority, custom and taboo. Moira seemed less conscious of the void around her, because she was both less orthodox and less sensitive than her sister. She enjoyed her freedoms without looking for supports.

It was through Moira that the new crisis came.

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She was engaged in a tussle with Marguerite—not a very serious one, or rather it had long ceased to be serious. It had started with a brisk attempt on the *bonne's* part to administer for some reason what she deplorably called “une bonne fessée.” Moira had naturally resisted, and found as usual that her best means of defence was to sit squarely on the floor. Marguerite had sought to outwit this manœuvre by seizing hold of her legs and trying to turn her over. Moira wriggled and writhed, managing by means of extraordinary contortions to keep the right way up. The affair which had started with much mutual recrimination was now entirely good-natured; indeed it might almost be said to have become a game of skill. Holding Moira's legs with one hand, Marguerite made swipes at her with the other, while Moira, her head and shoulders raised to watch what the other was doing, always contrived to keep her behind on the floor.

The contest had gone on for nearly five minutes, and Selina had lost interest in it. She sat idly turning over the pages of *Little Folks*, feeling almost peaceful, when suddenly the door opened and Baa came in. She must have run upstairs more quietly than usual, for Selina had heard nothing till her footsteps sounded on the landing. The other two, absorbed in their duel, heard nothing at all till her entrance.

“Hullo!” she cried. “Your Mother said I might come up. . . .”

Then her expression changed as she viewed the scene before her. It certainly was astonishing enough. Moira lay on the floor, strangely contorted, with her legs and the upper part of her body in the air. Marguerite stood before her, holding her legs in her hand

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with the ankles crossed, while the other hand was raised to smite. She had stopped with the blow suspended in mid-air, but as Baa spoke, Moira looked round, and the temptation was too much for her antagonist. She dived, as for one instant the required patch of white cotton drawers showed under a rumple of colours; she dived and smote—hard.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. Moira yelled, and Baa, crimson with fury, flew at Marguerite and hit her. Marguerite hit back. Selina yelled. Baa and Marguerite closed in deadly combat.

“Vous osez!—ah vous osez!” . . . “méchante” . . . “cruelle” . . . “laissez moi!” . . . “animale!” . . . “prenez ça! prenez ça!” . . . “brute!” . . . “vous, créature, vous!” . . . “V’la pour ta gueule!”

The English and French versions of the French language flew together and mingled in the midst of the children’s screaming. There was also the sharp sound of slaps and the dull sound of kicks and blows, for though Baa had attempted to wrestle, Marguerite had soon brought down the combat to a more primitive level. By the time that Father and Mother came running into the room (this time together) they were both on the floor. Pulling each other’s hair.

It was Baa who first heard the call to reason. She took advantage of a sudden slackening of Marguerite’s grip to scramble to her feet, and stood for a moment looking decidedly shamefaced.

“Baa, what on earth’s the meaning of this?”

“That woman’s mad, and she’s an absolute fiend.”

“But what started ——”

“She’s a fiend. She was beating Moira when I came into the room. So I hit her—I couldn’t help it.”

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Marguerite, who understood little of this conversation, brought it to a violent end by bursting into tears.

"Est tout ça vrai?" asked Mrs. South.

But Marguerite disregarded the question. Sitting on the floor, her hair hanging wildly over her eyes, the tears streaming down her cheeks, her collar undone, her apron pulled awry, she was the very picture of dishevelled grief and rage. And, thus sitting and weeping, she also cursed, adjured, invoked, proclaimed, lamented. No one could stop her, and no one—not even the children this time—could understand her; so after a while they left her alone.

Father and Mother questioned Baa and comforted the little girls. Baa was quite calm now, but still a little upset and very indignant.

"She hit Moira just as I came into the room. She was holding her in the air by her legs and trying to hit her behind; and the poor little thing was trying to keep her behind on the floor. . . ."

"I did," said Moira, "till you came into the room. She only got it once."

"But she hurt you. You cried."

"She didn't hurt as much as she does sometimes."

"Moira!" cried Mother, "what do you mean? Does she hit you often?"

"Yes—quite often. But I don't mind."

"Does she hit you, Selina?"

"Yes, but I don't mind. Oh, Mother! please, please don't send her away."

"Best come downstairs and talk quietly," said Father.

It was certainly impossible to talk quietly in the nursery, with Marguerite making such a noise. They all went down to the drawing-room where Father and

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Mother asked them questions about Marguerite. Had she always hit them? Did she hit them often? Where did she hit them? What did she hit them with?

Moira rather enjoyed narrating her adventures, but Selina realised that both Father and Mother very much disapproved of Marguerite's hitting them and might send her away because of it.

"Oh, don't make her go! I don't mind being hit. Oh, please let her stay. I don't mind being hit at all."

"But I mind your being hit," said Mother, "it isn't good for you."

"I like it better than being sent to bed," said Moira. "Miss Johnson and Marguerite both have nicer punishments than Nurse."

"Well, it might do you harm, and I won't allow it. Now, Selina, don't start again."

But Selina was off, screaming and sobbing and begging for Marguerite to stay.

Her devotion cooled a little when, on their return to the nursery, they found that Marguerite would not speak to anyone or eat any tea. When bedtime came she refused to put them to bed, so Mother had to do it. Then suddenly she recovered. La Katrine's head came round the door of the night nursery and a funny deep voice said:

"Vive la France et les pommes de terre frites!"

They yelled with laughter and delight.

§ 10

But of course they knew that, after what had happened, Marguerite would have to go. Mother would

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never forgive her a second time, and, besides, she did not want to be forgiven. She told them the very next morning that she had had enough, and even though she would have to find another place, nothing was likely to be as bad as this. For nowhere else would she have to endure "cette Baa" and "cette Stoobaire-field" (behold two names for sleeping out of doors!), and Hastings on the whole was "triste," and she would like a family where there were some young people, not just two children.

This was a sad change, and both the little girls were depressed by it. But it made them less sorry to lose her, and Father and Mother were spared the tears and entreaties of an earlier occasion. No one, however, could feel happy till it was known who would come instead of Marguerite. That old-fashioned nanna still eluded Mother's search, to the delight of Selina and the despair of her parents.

Nearly a fortnight passed in a futile round of newspaper advertisements and registry offices. Then one morning Mother came down to breakfast and found a letter beside her plate. When she had read it she burst into tears.

Immediately Father was on his feet, running round to her, still clutching his table-napkin.

"What is it, my pet? Tell me what's happened. There, there—don't cry. Tell me what it is."

"It's from Nurse," gulped Mother; "her mother's dead—at last!"

"At last?" Father looked bewildered. "Did she suffer very much? . . . But, don't cry, darling. I'm sorry for poor Nurse, but it must have been a merciful release."

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He gave her his handkerchief to dry her eyes with, but she could not stop crying.

"You really mustn't be so upset about it. She was a very old lady, and you didn't know her very well, did you? I didn't even know you'd met her."

"Ted," sobbed Mother, "you're an ass."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Now She's Nine

§ 1

IT WAS NO SMALL PART OF THE GREAT MERCY OF NURSE'S return that she should be back in time for Selina's birthday. Her steadying hand was badly needed through the days immediately preceding that Winter feast, and it is painful to conjecture what the atmosphere of the nursery would have been had the little girl's restless excitement met nothing more soothing or restraining than the equally explosive moods of Marguerite.

However, such conjectures are beside the point, for Nurse was back and already well-established. No such sensational or illuminating incidents marked this second return as had marked the first. Either she was better able to control her grief, or perhaps she did not feel very acutely the death of the ailing mother whose care had kept her from the life she loved. But certainly she appeared very much as usual, and had not been back more than a few hours before she set

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to work to give the nursery "a good turn out"—Marguerite's care for the persons of her charges not having apparently extended to their surroundings.

The children had been forbidden under unusually severe penalties to mention the death of either Nurse's father or mother, and soon the months knit their torn edges together as every year they knit them around Platnix. It seemed as if Nurse had never been away, Miss Thompson might not have existed, and Marguerite survived only in a deposit of rather low-class French and an ugly rag doll, who once had been alive but now was dead.

Anyhow, Selina was able to clear her mind after a very brief extasy, and devote herself wholeheartedly to the process of looking forward to what was, next to Christmas, the most exciting day of the year. Her birthday came three weeks after Moira's, which was just as well, as she was old enough to endure the sight of her sister receiving presents on the assurance that she would shortly be doing so herself; whereas, had the procedure been reversed, Moira would never have tolerated such an advantage, nor would Selina, when Moira's birthday came, have been kept from jealousy by her own anticipations.

This year she was, if possible, more excited than usual. For she very soon became convinced that Father and Mother were going to give her a pony. The evidence for this conviction was a trifle thin, consisting chiefly of her own earnest desire mixed with the fact that Mother was being more than usually mysterious. What could be more natural than that this pony, so long and ardently hoped for, should at last materialize on her ninth birthday? In the children's books she

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read, or had read to her, a pony was quite a usual birthday gift. Either after many veiled hints or suddenly, overwhelmingly, as a surprise, a pony appeared on the happy day. The fact that Selina had many times asked for a pony and as many times been told that she could not have one went simply for nothing at all.

She hugged her conviction so closely to herself that nothing was able to shatter it. Indeed, things happened that seemed to give it support. For instance, about a week before her birthday Mother said:

"Now, Selina, I want you to promise me something. Father and I are giving you rather a special sort of present this year, and I want you to promise that you'll let Moira have a share of it and play with it as much as she wants. It will belong to you, but you mustn't be selfish and keep it to yourself."

"Oh, yes, Mother, of course I promise."

"That's a good little girl."

The days passed happily in faith confirmed. But even such a faith as Selina's might have wavered when the evening before her birthday she heard men's footsteps on the stairs and was told that it was her present being carried up to the spare bedroom. Indeed in a sense her faith did waver—that is to say a part of her could not help knowing that you can't keep a pony in a bedroom and that if Father and Mother had meant to give her a pony they would have kept it at the stables with Father's horses. But there was a part of Selina which would have believed in the pony even if she had been told that her present was under the spare-room bed . . . that part reminded her that the present must be very big and heavy or it would not

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have needed men to carry it upstairs. And perhaps Father and Mother did not want to keep it at the stables in case it rained tomorrow; they would think it safer to have it in the house—and if you put hay on the spare-room floor. . . .

§ 2

She woke at the first watery gleam of dawn, her head buzzing with an excitement that was manifold. Not only had she the pony to look forward to, but there were her other presents—mysterious packages now hidden away but soon to become her treasures; and there would be her own chosen dinner of chicken and chocolate blanc-mange, and tea dramatically served in the dolls' teaset. There was also the sudden thrilling change from eight to nine. Not for Selina the slow passage of the months, the imperceptible merging of one year into another. Yesterday she had been eight; today she was nine—suddenly, catastrophically, a new creature. Already, looking back, eight-years-old seemed very small, whereas nine was big, imposing, the last single figure of her age, almost her 'teens. She quivered with importance under the bedclothes.

"Please, Nurse, may I get up?"

But Nurse, for whom a new life had not begun with the new day, was still sound asleep, and even nine-years-old did not feel bold enough to wake her. She lay instead, watching the light come into the room, while sundry noises announced the waking house. She heard thumps upstairs, which might have been Cook and Rose getting up, but were more likely, she thought, to be the pony's hoofs stamping on the spare-room

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floor. She wondered what colour he was. The ponies in the books were usually white . . . "a dear little white pony . . . 'oh, thank you, grandfather dear,' cried Lionel, throwing his arms round the old man's neck." . . . Selina would throw her arms round Mother's neck and Father's too; and also round the pony's—he would eat a lump of sugar out of her hand. What should she call him?—Eglantine? The name flashed romantically into her head. Hitherto she had not thought of a name for him, but now she decided to call him Eglantine.

A calmer moment followed in which she almost doubted if he could be there. After all, his hoofs would not be good for the spare-room carpet, and Mother was so particular—she would never allow a pony to be kept in the house. But that moment of doubt was so blank and dull that soon Selina found herself edging away from it back into the radiance of her old faith. After all, the spare-room could soon be cleaned up; and that thumping sound *couldn't* be just Rose's feet.

Buzz-zz-zz-zz.

Nurse's alarm-clock went off, and Nurse lifted a sleepy head from the pillow. Moira woke and instantly sat up in bed.

"Many happy returns of the day, S'lina."

"Many happy returns, dear," said Nurse.

The glory had begun.

It was not appreciably dimmed by the time both the children were dressed and in their Mother's room. Here to their surprise they found their parents up and in their dressing-gowns. Generally Mother was in bed having her early morning tea.

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"But we had to get up today," she said, "because Selina's present is too big to have in this room, so we've got it in the spare-room upstairs."

"Will she have to keep it always in the spare-room?" asked Moira.

"Oh, no. When she's seen it we'll have it carried down to the nursery."

This might have corrected Selina's hope if it had not by now soared beyond any possible reach of sense or reason. She was like an excited pony herself, prancing wildly and kicking up her heels, as the procession, led by Father and Mother and ending with Nurse, walked upstairs.

The spare-room door gleamed very black and enchanting. Selina could scarcely breathe as Father took hold of the handle.

"Now," he said mysteriously, "we'll see what we'll see."

The door opened, and Selina saw—a large swing-boat.

§ 3

The shock was so overwhelming that she almost burst into tears. She stood stock still in the doorway staring at the dismal end of her hopes.

"Ooh! how lovely!" gurgled Moira.

"Go in and look at it, darling," said Mother, who put down her daughter's silence and rigidity to the paralysis of delight.

Selina moved mechanically forward, her legs shaking, her bosom heaving. Before she had reached the chair the struggle was over and she was sobbing wildly.

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"Selina! what on earth are you crying for?" from Nurse.

"What *is* the matter?" from Mother.

"What is it, pet?" from Father.

At first Selina could not tell them. It sounded too silly. For not least among her torments was the contempt of that sensible part of herself which had never believed in the pony. She knew now that she had been quite stupid and babyish about it—believing a thing which was impossible. And yet, even though she knew that it was silly, the loss of her belief was overwhelming, and she sobbed helplessly on.

"Selina, do stop crying and tell me what it is. Are you ill?"

"I 'spect she doesn't like it," said Moira.

"Is that true?" asked Mother. "Tell me at once, Selina—is that why you're crying?"

She would have to tell them now.

"I—I thought it was a p-p-pony."

"A pony!"

Everyone exclaimed at her.

"How *could* it have been a pony!" cried Mother.

"Really, Selina, you should think," said Nurse.

"We don't keep ponies in the spare-room," said Father.

"It would have made messes on the floor," said Moira, the unfailing realist.

Selina wished now that she had not told them; but it was too late to do anything about it—unless she pulled herself together and pretended to like the swing-boat. That effort, unfortunately, was beyond her.

"I think you're a very silly little girl," said Mother, "and very ungrateful too. Father and I thought you'd

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be so pleased; and that swing-boat cost nearly as much as a pony."

"Oh, come, come," said Father. "She likes the boat very much really, only if it was a pony she'd like it better. That's so, isn't it, sweetheart?"

Selina made an inarticulate sound. She could not bear to hurt Father's feelings but the truth was that she would have liked the swing-boat better if it had been a swing-horse or a rocking-horse or a doll's house or a doll's pram or in fact almost anything but a swing-boat. She did not care for boats—you couldn't think of them as people in the way you could think of toy horses or other animals or even dolls; and they gave no scope to her instinct for adornment—you could not dress them up or arrange them in beautiful patterns. And in this case you could not even get any comfort from the contemplation of a lovely shape or glowing colours, for the swing-boat was made of basket-work and plain brown wood, and consisted only of a sort of chair at each end and a seat in the middle; it stood for nothing but a peculiarly safe and unstimulating form of exercise.

"Well, really," said Mother, "I *am* disappointed."

"I like it, Mother," piped Moira. "I think it's lovely. If you like you can give it to me instead of her."

This revived Selina little.

"No, it's mine. Mother said it was to be mine, but I could let you play with it."

"There, Selina! You see you've remembered what I told you about it. That ought to have shown you it wasn't a pony."

Shown her? Why, it had shown her just the opposite. But she would not enter into that.

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"I think these two children ought to be very grateful to you, Ma'am," said Nurse. "You've given them a lovely toy."

Grief and opposition were making Selina cross.

"I don't want a toy. I want something that's alive."

"Now, Selina," said Mother severely, "if you don't behave at once you shan't have any of your other presents today."

This brought her to her senses. She gulped down her sobs and said she was sorry. Then Moira climbed into one chair and she climbed into the other, and they swung up and down like a see-saw, while Mother and Nurse and Father all said how nice it was—so quiet you could hardly hear it, and so safe that the children could play with it even when there was nobody in the room—"while with those rocking-horses. . . ." But a rocking-horse could have been called Eglantine. . . . Selina gave one more sniff.

§ 4

However, she soon felt better—when they had gone downstairs into the nursery and Nurse had produced a tiny little doll's table, laid for dinner, with plates and knives and glasses and even a bottle of wine on it, while Moira contributed a painting-book full of lovely flowers. Rose brought up breakfast, and there was a present from herself and Cook on the tray—a dear little straw basket with cherries on it. Altogether, though the main course of the feast had failed there was still a measure of comfort to be found in the side-dishes, and Selina was quite cheerful and excited again by the time Baa came in with her offering.

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"Many happy returns, kid. Here's a pencil-box."

For a moment Selina was disappointed, as a pencil-box came into the useful rather than the ornamental category of presents. But she remembered that it was also a distinctly grown-up possession, and the only gift she had had so far that acknowledged the leap from eight to nine. Besides, the next moment Baa added:

"Look here, may I take her in to see Mother? She's got something for her."

This was really exciting, as up till now Baa's mother had never given her anything; and though Selina was not so far demented as to think Mrs. Craig had a pony for her, she felt sure that it must be something quite unusual and delightful.

"Oh, Nurse, please let me go."

"Very well; you'll bring her straight back, won't you, Miss Baa?"

"Yes, rather. We shan't be long. Hurry up, kid. I've got to go to school."

So Selina hurried with Nurse's help into her bonnet and pelisse, and ran off with Baa to the next-door house where Mrs. Craig, still in bed and looking very lacy and unlike Mother in the same situation, gave her the surprising gift of an embroidered frock.

At first she was too much astonished to say anything or even to know if she were pleased or disappointed.

"I've made this for you myself," said Mrs. Craig. "Nurse lent me one of your old ones as a pattern. Try it on and see if it fits."

Always a polite child outside her family, Selina said "Thank you very much," but continued to view the frock with more surprise than pleasure. She had certainly seen nothing like it before, for it represented

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the first impact on Hastings of the Aesthetic Movement of the 'nineties. The material was a sort of crepe and the colour a bilious yellow; there was a lot of smocking and embroidery in yellow and green and mauve, and altogether it bore no resemblance to any frock that she had ever worn or seen on anyone else. At last two thoughts formed themselves in her head: I wish it was pink; and: Hooray! it has two pockets.

By this time she was wearing it and seeing herself in the wardrobe glass, looking rather paler than usual against the greenery-yellery. She was glad to notice that it was longer than her dresses usually were, nearly touching the tops of her socks—she could almost pretend that they were stockings. . . .

"Yes," said Mrs. Craig, "that looks very nice. She'd better not wear it to go home in. Take her into your room, Baa, and change her there. I want to talk to Cook," and she pulled the embroidered bell-handle on the wall behind her.

Baa bundled Selina out of the room, telling her to hurry up or she'd make her late for school.

"I suppose it's not your own fault that you're so helpless," she said when they were alone together among the tennis-rackets, school-photographs and dissected zoological specimens that made Baa's room such a remarkable contrast to her mother's, "but I really do think you might learn to change your own clothes now you're nine. By the way, how did you like the surprise?"

"You mean the frock?"

"No, of course not. The swing-boat."

Selina's sniffs came back in spite of herself.

"Oh, Baa, I didn't like it at all."

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"Why ever not?"

"Because I—I'd thought it was going to be a p-pony."

"A pony!"—Baa started at her in amazement and contempt.—"You silly little idiot! How could it possibly have been a pony?"

"I—I d-don't see why not. It could have lived up at the stables with the horses, and I—I—I—I've always wanted s-something a-hic-live."

"Now, Selina, for goodness' sake, remember you're nine, and don't howl."

Baa spoke sternly, but in her heart she was not unsympathetic. She had always disapproved of the way Mrs. South refused to let the children keep a pet. It was good for kids to have an animal in the nursery, and though, unlike Selina, she could see practical objections to a pony, she saw none to a puppy or a kitten, or even to a pair of white mice . . . her hand faltered on the hooks of the yellow gown. She was thinking.

"Look here . . ." she said.

"What?"

Selina had felt the change in her mood, and suddenly her heart beat quickly.

"How would you like to go shares in a white rat?"

"You mean have a white rat between us?"

"Yes, but no one would have to know anything about it; because I'm not supposed to have him really."

"What! Have you got one?"

Baa opened her cupboard and took from the bottom a small wicker basket. Inside, on a bed of shavings and cotton-wool, lay a white rat with pink eyes.

"Is he alive?" asked Selina, breathing loud in awe.

"Of course he is—only rather sleepy, as he's been

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shut up in the cupboard all night. I took him to college yesterday, but Miss Daybell made such a fuss. . . . Mother doesn't know I've got him."

"Oh!"

"No, she can't bear rats or mice, and I've been worrying about him, because if I leave him behind while I'm at college Ellen will probably find him or that wretched cat might get him."

"That would be awful."

"Yes it would, and that's why I'm offering you to go shares. You can have him all the morning while I'm at college, and I'll have him at other times."

In Selina's bosom a powerful extasy struggled with fear.

"Oh, Baa, I should love it. But Mother would never let me."

"She mustn't know anything about it, you idiot. That's the whole point."

"But how can she not know?"

"You can keep him in your pocket. He'll be as good as gold and no one will ever know he's there. I had him in my pocket all the first day, and it's only when I had to change into my gym dress that he was found out."

"But if I have to change my dress?"

"You won't have to. I'll be back before you do. I'll come straight in from college and manage somehow to take him off you; and tomorrow I'll take him all the time because we don't have gym. It's only for to-day and the other gym days; and in exchange for that you've got half a white rat."

Selina was flattered and dazzled, but in spite of that some fear remained.

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"Nurse would be sure to find out."

"Why should she? I tell you he'll stay as quiet as anything in your pocket, and that dress Mother made you will do beautifully. The pockets are enormous—twice the size of mine."

"But your Mother said I was to take it off."

"Well, you needn't. You'd better go home in it, because they're sure to want to see it on, and then you can say you want to wear it all the morning because it's your birthday."

"But on other days I won't be allowed to wear it."

"Well, on other days he'll have to go into your ordinary pocket, that's all. Don't be always making objections. You're always saying 'but.'"

"But—" Selina bit her lip. "Oh, Baa, I'm sorry, and I do so want to go shares in him; it's only that I'm so afraid he'll be found out."

"He won't if you're sensible, and you ought to be sensible now you're nine. You can't go on being a little muff and milksop all your life. I tell you it's a sporting offer. You get half a rat, and only have to look after him on three mornings a week."

"Will he really be half mine?"

"Of course he will be. And I tell you what—he'll be all yours whenever you've got him. You can think of him as your own pet—nearly as nice as a pony. And when you come to tea you can play with him here in this room, and in summer I'll bring him over into the Gardens. . . ."

Selina could hesitate no longer.

"Oh, Baa! I must have him! I must!— I must!"

"Very well, here he is, then. And now for heaven's sake let's hurry up. It's a quarter past nine."

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The rat was hastily stowed with a wisp of cotton-wool in Selina's pocket, she was bundled into her pelisse and her old dress rolled up into a ball for her to carry home.

"Now rush—tear! My, how I shall catch it!"

They rushed downstairs.

"Baa, you won't forget to come in before dinner."

"Of course not! Why should I? Now you surely can go those two steps home by yourself. I've got to run."

And she darted off across the road towards the Ladies' College, leaving Selina nervously contemplating the three or four yards of pavement that lay between herself and her own door.

§ 5

At home the frock was critically received.

"I don't like that colour," said Mrs. South, "it makes you look pale."

"I must put a tuck in," said Nurse; "it's far too long."

"There's lots of material, anyhow," said Mother; "and really it's most beautifully worked. How do you like it, darling?"

"I like it very much."

"Well, you must take it off now. It's far too good for every day. Indeed I don't know when you're going to wear it; I can't let you go about dressed differently from Moira."

"Oh, mayn't I wear it to-day, Mother? Just because it's my birthday."

"I'm afraid you'll spoil it."

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"I shan't— I promise. Do let me wear it."

"Well, I'm glad you like it, anyhow. I suppose she can keep it on, Nurse? She could wear her overall over it if she plays with anything grubby."

"Certainly, ma'am. Now she's nine she may as well learn to take care of her clothes."

So Selina went upstairs greatly relieved to have won her first trick so easily. The dress was certainly ideal for the concealment of a white rat. Not only did its pocket provide a hiding-place that was ample and comfortable, but its voluminous folds disguised any possible bulges. Moreover the stiffness and caution of her movements could be, and actually were, put down by Nurse to a very proper care for its preservation.

She could just feel the rat in her pocket. He really was very good; he scarcely moved—perhaps he was still asleep. Once or twice when she was sure nobody was looking she slipped in her hand and felt his warm and furry back. The feeling gave her a curious thrill. This was the first time she had ever had a pet more exciting than a spider or a caterpillar. When she was a little girl, no more than seven or eight, these had sometimes seemed good enough, but now she wanted something more. She wanted something warm and cuddly, something that would know her and love her—a pony for choice, but failing that, a white rat with pink eyes.

She wondered what his name was. In the hurry and excitement she had forgotten to ask Baa. Perhaps he had not got a name; and in that case she might ask if she could call him Eglantine. . . . She would call him that for today anyhow.

The morning had turned out rainy, so there could

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be no walk. The children settled down very happily to play in the Nursery, and even Selina began to see some good in the swing-boat. Not that it was nearly so nice or exciting as a rocking-horse, but it was certainly safer for anyone with a white rat in her pocket. Sitting in one of the chairs, she could arrange her dress so that Eglantine came on her knee and suffered the minimum of disturbance. She could feel him warm and heavy and delicious, and once or twice he moved. . . . She slipped her hand into her pocket for a caress and received a decided nip.

"Oh!"

The exclamation came from her before she could stop it; and it was a cry of wounded affection as much as of physical pain.

"What's the matter, Selina?" asked Nurse.

"Nothing."

"Then why did you say 'Oh'?"

"Something pricked my finger—that's all."

"I'll see if there's a nail sticking up," said Nurse.

She came and looked at the swing-boat. No projecting nail was to be seen, so she told Selina it must be her imagination, and for the first time the little girl was glad to accept this humiliating verdict.

She was careful not to put her hand in her pocket again, even when Eglantine's movements became more definite. He was evidently waking up, and as time wore on she began to feel anxious about him. He seemed to be wanting to get out. Perhaps he was hungry—perhaps Baa had forgotten to feed him this morning. Her heart moved towards him in pity, forgetting his baseness. What could she do? The answer was quite plainly nothing; except see that he did not

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escape. She pinched the opening of her pocket together with an anxious finger and thumb. It was very deep and she did not think he could climb out, but she knew nothing of the capabilities of white rats, so took every precaution.

"Let's play with the Lodge," said Moira.

But this, Selina felt, would involve too much moving about.

"Oh, no, let's go on riding in the boat."

It was fortunate that her secret promoted rather than discouraged orthodox behaviour. It had made her appear to delight in her new dress, and now it made her equally appear to delight in the swing-boat. It was Moira who first grew tired of playing with it, and then Selina was able still to keep on the right side of authority by begging that they should sit at the table and play with Nurse's dinner-set.

She was in this way able to fill up the time till nearly a quarter to one. Baa always came home before one o'clock and Selina was listening eagerly for her footsteps on the stairs. The pains of her possession of Eglantine had come actually to outweigh the pleasures, and she would be glad when Baa arrived to take him away. He was now wriggling frantically, and when she tried to hold him still, she got another nip from his sharp little teeth through the material of her dress. This time she was able to suppress a scream, and the grimace she was unable to suppress Nurse luckily did not see. But she was coming reluctantly to the conclusion that he was not really a nice pet—certainly not nearly so nice as a pony; perhaps he would be different when he knew her better . . . she hoped so.

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but meanwhile she wished Baa would come and take him away.

As the clock ticked on she realised that Baa's delay was unnatural. It was now after one, and Nurse was beginning to clear away her sewing. On Selina's birthday they always went downstairs to the dining-room for dinner, and there would certainly first be an elaborate toilet during which Eglantine would be more difficult than ever to conceal.

"Come on, children; it's time to wash your hands."

"Oh, Nurse, mayn't we wait till Baa comes in?"

"What makes you think she's coming in? She doesn't usually come at this time."

"She said she was coming today, and, Nurse, I do so love playing with this dear, sweet little dinner set you gave me."

"You can play with that afterwards. You haven't any more time now. And you certainly can't wait for Miss Baa. She's late—I don't suppose she's coming."

"She promised she would," cried Selina in tones of high tragedy.

"Now, don't be silly, dear. You see quite enough of Miss Baa, I'm sure, and I daresay she'll be in as soon as she's finished her dinner—it must be her own dinner time now."

"But she promised to look in first."

"Come along at once," said Nurse severely.

The argument ended perforce, but Selina's anguish had increased sevenfold. Eglantine seemed to be bounding about in his prison—and what had happened to Baa? She had never for a moment imagined that Baa would fail her, and so much had depended on her punctual arrival. . . . Perhaps she was killed—

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run over on her way home from school—and Selina would be left forever with a white rat in her pocket.

It did not, however, occur to her for an instant to betray her trust. The consequences would be too dreadful. She would certainly be scolded, if not punished, and Eglantine would be taken away; and though she no longer enjoyed her peculiar form of possession, she would be sorry to lose him entirely. Besides, and worst of all, Baa—if happily still alive—would despise her and regard her as a mere kid who couldn't be trusted. No, she mustn't fail Baa, even though Baa had failed her. She must manage somehow to keep her secret.

"I think you'd better change into another dress before dinner, Selina. You might spill something."

"Oh, Nurse, please let me keep it on. Father hasn't seen it."

"Then you must be a good girl and wear a feeder."

A feeder on her ninth birthday!

"All right," she murmured faintly.

§ 6

A birthday dinner was a solemn rite. The dining-room table shone with glass and silver and the great gleaming dish-cover that domed the chicken. Rose whisked it off and Father sharpened his carving knife.

"Up guards and at 'em!" he cried.

It was not often that the little girls had chicken, and normally Selina would have been in a great state of excitement over this one—telling Father to be sure to give her the Parson's nose, which was her favourite piece. But today all the glamour and goodness had

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gone out of the banquet. She was far too much worried about Eglantine to care what she had to eat.

He had ceased to bound and wriggle, but instead he seemed to be tickling. It was a most curious and dreadful sensation and could hardly be endured without grimaces. Risking a nip, she put her hand into her pocket. It was then she discovered that he was nibbling her dress.

"Selina!" cried Mother, "don't look so miserable. What on earth's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Then look bright! Really you're not behaving at all well this birthday. Nothing seems to please you. You must be getting spoilt."

Mother spoke heartlessly, little knowing that she addressed a combination of Casabianca and the Spartan Boy. Selina forced a wan smile and filled her mouth with chicken.

The meal dragged on, chicken, bottled peas, chocolate blanc-mange, and lemonade tasting much the same as boiled cod, cabbage, rice-pudding and water. Oh, what had happened to Baa? Why didn't she come? Surely she couldn't have forgotten? Oh, Baa! Baa! where are you? Oh, please come.

He call'd aloud—"Say, Father, say

If yet my task is done."

He knew not that the chieftain lay

Unconscious of his son.

In other words Baa was still in the fifth form room at the Ladies College, kept in by Miss Daybell to struggle with the sums she had missed earlier through being half an hour late.

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"Selina," said Mother, "I don't believe you're well. You look quite pale."

"Yes, yes, Mother. I'm all right. I'm only thinking of something."

"Then don't think about it any more. Come along, dear, talk and be happy!"

Selina began to talk rather wildly about Marguerite and La Katrine. She hardly knew what she was saying, for Eglantine's nibble was now something more than a tickle. He must have eaten through her dress and have started on her underclothes. . . . He must be dreadfully hungry . . . perhaps he would never stop . . . perhaps he would go on and on till he was eating Selina herself. . . . She would simply have to scream when he began to gnaw her flesh.

But Eglantine was not hungry; he only wanted his liberty, and being a stupid animal he did not realise that he was free when he had eaten through Selina's pocket. He ate his way through her flannel petticoat, then suddenly realised that his end was achieved and darted off to freedom down her leg.

§ 7

Rose the parlourmaid had been in Mrs. South's service for over six years. She knew her work and her place so well that it was quite startling to see her bang down a plate with such violence that it cracked in half and at the same time emit the unprofessional exclamation:

"Wow!"

"It's a mouse. Sorry, ma'am, but it's a mouse—there

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it is! there! there! Oh, excuse me, Ma'am!" and Rose dashed out of the room.

"Oh! oh!" cried Mother, standing up.

"It's a rat—a white rat!" said Nurse. "I saw it just then."

"Where?" asked Father.

"There—no, there!—it's gone."

Selina burst into tears and of course Nurse guessed at once.

"You know something about it."

"It—it isn't mine," wailed Selina, taking refuge in the fact that her period of possession had legally expired.

"But you had it with you somehow, I'm sure. That's what's been the matter."

"Selina," began Mother, but immediately continued "oh! oh! there it is!"

"Where?"

"There."

"I don't ——"

"No, it's gone!"

At that moment the door opened gingerly and Rose poked her head round it to announce:

"Miss Baa."

Baa hurried in, looking worried and untidy.

"Excuse me, but I just came to say something to Selina—hullo! what's up?"

"There's a white rat in the room," said Father. "Perhaps you can help us catch it."

"Perhaps you can tell us where it came from," said Nurse grimly.

Baa went purple.

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"You little idiot!" she cried, glaring at Selina.

"I—I couldn't help it. I—I really c-couldn't. He—he'd eaten right through my c-c-clothes."

"Eaten through your clothes!" cried Nurse, "let me see at once."

A very brief inspection showed her that the rat had eaten a large hole in the greenery-yallery dress and one only slightly smaller through the petticoat beneath.

"You mean to say you've had that rat in your pocket all the morning?"

"I'll explain," said Baa. "I'll explain everything, but we must find him first or he'll get trodden on."

She began hunting anxiously about the room, assisted by Moira and Father, while Nurse scolded and Mother asked questions and Selina wept brokenheartedly.

"Really," said Mother, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself—on your ninth birthday."

"It isn't her fault," said Baa, emerging apologetically from under the dumb-waiter—"at least not her fault that she had him. I gave him to her to keep while I was at college. But it's her fault that she lost him, the silly fool."

"Baa," said Mother, "don't talk like that."

"I'm sorry, but I really shall be desperate if he's lost and I can't find him anywhere."

"Perhaps he's gone out," said Moira. "The door's been opened lots of times."

They went out and hunted in the hall, but no Eglantine was to be seen, either in the hall or in any of the other rooms. For days afterwards the little girls expected him to turn up in some part of the house,

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and Baa was always coming in to look for him, but he was never found. Probably he had slipped out of doors and gone somewhere far away.

By the time she had hunted vainly through the house and garden Baa was nearly in tears herself.

"You'd better go home, dear," said Mrs. South. "Your Mother will be getting anxious."

"Will you promise to send for me at once if he turns up?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Well, all I can say is . . . I mean I'm sorry to have made all this fuss, but I never thought Selina would be such a little f—— idiot. It's her fault, really."

Selina was goaded to retaliation.

"At first you said it wasn't my fault—and it wasn't. It was yours for being late."

"And whose fault is it that I was late?—yours, for being such a little ninny that you couldn't change your dress without help."

"I didn't change my dress."

"But you would have if I hadn't had an idea I could trust you with poor Snuff."—Snuff? Snuff? was *that* what she had called him?—"The point is that I was made late by being sent to help you. None of this would have happened if you could have managed for yourself like any other child of nine."

Baa had been demoralised by her bereavement, or she would not have spoken so unfairly, but Selina was wounded to the quick.

"I can't help being nine. It's not my fault I'm nine. I wish I wasn't nine. I wish I was eight again—or seven—or five. I wish I was a tiny long-clothes baby"—and she ran out of the room.

NOW SHE'S NINE

§ 8

"Selina, come back!"— "Come back this minute!" Both Mother and Nurse called after her. But she would not hear them. There was only one place in the house where she expected to find comfort, and she ran into her father's study.

"Oh—oh, Father!" she sobbed. "Do help me! My birthday's gone all wrong."

It certainly had gone wrong if her glorious new age was to be made a subject of responsibility and reproach instead of freedom and honour. Everyone was angry with her—even Baa—and using the fact that she was nine to make her appear more than usually silly and naughty; and she had not been given a pony, and she had lost Eglantine, and all the savour of her birthday dinner . . . and now she supposed that because she had been so naughty she would not be allowed to have tea out of the dolls' teaset. . . .

"What is it, my pet?" asked Father, taking her on his knee.

"Oh—oh—oh! I'm so unhappy. Baa's angry with me, and so's Mother and Nurse—and I—I've lost Eglantine."

"What?—the rat? Oh, never mind. He's having a good time somewhere, and rats aren't nice animals. They bite."

This was certainly true.

"But Mother's angry with me, and I'm afraid she won't let me have tea out of the dolls' teaset."

"Oh yes, she will, for I'm coming to tea, you know,

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and I'll tell her I won't have any unless it's out of a doll's cup."

"Are *you* coming, Father! Oh, how lovely! Hooray! Hooray!"

Tears were changed to smiles, for this had never happened before. But perhaps Dr. South had also seen that tea-party in danger and had decided that his daughter had already had enough punishment for one birthday.

"Yes, I'm coming. We must do something special because you're nine today. And first of all we'll all go out for a drive into the country. It's turned out fine, and I'm not busy this afternoon."

"Oh, Father! Father! may we go to Platnix?"

"I'm afraid that's too far; it gets dark so early. But perhaps we'll go to Crowhurst and see if there are any catkins out."

Selina jumped off his knee and danced about for joy. A drive into the country was an unusual treat, and it was the first time it had happened on her birthday.

"Oh, that will be lovely! heavenly! Oh, I'm so happy. May I go and get ready at once? And Father, when we go up the hills you needn't bother to tell us a story, because I've got one to tell you—about Trimmer, Father, it's her birthday today and she's been given a beautiful dear little white pony."

CHAPTER NINE

The Boy Friend

§ I

What are little girls made of?
What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice and all that's nice
That's what little girls are made of.

SO RAN THE NURSERY RHYME, WITH ITS COMPLEMENTARY verse:

What are little boys made of?
What are little boys made of?
Slugs and snails and puppy-dogs tails
That's what little boys are made of.

Neither Moira nor Selina was such a fundamentalist as to believe every word of this ditty, but they accepted the general sense, which was that little girls are nice and little boys are not. They did not like little boys; whatever the future might hold, little boys were at present unpopular. They were rough and rude, wore silly clothes, said silly things, and did not care for

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anything that really mattered. Grown-up men were different; indeed the children liked them much better than grown-up ladies—they made lovely jokes, and let you do what you liked without even guessing that Nurse would disapprove. But boys . . . at parties the girls always huddled together—it was much nicer to dance with a girl than a boy, for a girl knew the steps and she talked sense—while in the Markwick Gardens the boys played cricket and football, despising the adventure “Hide and Seek,” the tense glow of “Colours,” or the happy domesticities of “House.” Both as dancing-partners and as playmates boys were almost useless, and it was with a clear sense of depression that the children heard their mother announce:

“A little boy has come to live in Tower Road and his mother has asked if he may go out for walks with you sometimes.”

“I wish he was a little girl,” said Moira.

“So do I,” said Selina. “Oh, Mother, *why* isn’t he a little girl?”

“Come, come,” said Mother, “he’s a very nice little boy indeed. His name’s Derek, and he’s eight years old—he just comes between you.”

“Will he be like Julian?” asked Moira.

Both Moira and Selina disliked and despised Julian, whose normal greeting was a hoop-stick aimed at the middle of his lady friend, with: “Now I will open your tummy and see what you’ve had for dinner.”

“No,” said Mother, “he won’t be like Julian. For one thing, he’s very delicate, and that’s why his mother wants him to go out with you and not with other little boys who might be rough with him.”

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"Will he die soon?" asked Moira hopefully.

"No, of course not. Who ever heard of such a thing? He's only delicate—that's all."

"It would be nice if he died, as then we could go to the funeral."

"For shame, Moira! You ought to be ashamed of yourself for saying such a dreadful thing. And I'm very disappointed in you both. I thought you'd be so pleased to have someone to go out with—you often say it's dull. I know Nurse will enjoy having Derek's Nurse to talk to."

"Oh, is his Nurse coming too?" asked Moira much more brightly.

They both felt comforted by the thought of Derek's Nurse. Not only were Nurses often agreeable and always interesting, but the fact that Derek had his with him would prevent his claiming from theirs an undue share of those attentions which they had always regarded as their own exclusive right.

"I wonder what his Nurse will be like," said Selina.

"I 'spect she'll be nice," said Moira.

"Oh, I think she'll be nice—she'll be awf'ly, awf'ly nice," cried Selina, soaring up at once from resignation to exaltation. "Mother, if she's nice I shall tell her about Trimmer. Mother, I think I shall write a story called 'The Nice Nurse'."

§ 2

Unfortunately Derek's Nurse was not at all nice. They came to that conclusion at the end of their very first walk together. For one thing she was quite old, with grey hair tucked in wisps under her bonnet, for

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another she was inclined to speak crossly to any child who was not her own, and for yet another she did not know the difference between falsehood and fiction. She rebuked Selina quite sharply for telling Derek that in the empty house at the bottom of Denmark Road lived a hideous ghost with white eyes and a head like a loaf of bread.

"You know that's not true," she said severely, "and you oughtn't to say it. I'm surprised that a little girl like you should tell such a fib."

"It isn't a fib," said Selina, terribly hurt. She knew quite well that she mustn't tell fibs, and to do her justice she hardly ever did so. But this was something quite different. She tried to explain.

"It's a ghost I imagine to be there. Mother lets me make up what I like about things that don't happen."

"I'm sure your mother doesn't do any such thing. I never heard of a little girl who was allowed by her mother to tell falsehoods, and I won't have you frightening Derek like this."

Derek himself did nothing to atone for the shortcomings of his nurse. He was a pale little boy in a sailor suit, who had very little to say for himself and when he did say anything, said it lamentably with a lisp.

"I don't want to hear anything about gothth," he piped, "won't you make up a thtory for me about thomething nithe?"

Normally Selina would have been only too glad to oblige, but today she was offended, and would say nothing, so Derek's nurse told her she was a cross little girl and that it shocked her to see it.

Even Nurse herself was against her.

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"You really are being naughty, Selina. You know you always like to make up stories. Why don't you want to tell one to Derek?"

"Because he's a silly little idiot," was on the tip of Selina's tongue, but she wisely let it go no further. "I—I can't think of anything," she mumbled.

"Well, run on now with Derek and Moira and think of something," said Nurse.

She wanted to explain to the other nurse that Selina wasn't generally as disagreeable as that.

The two little girls in their crimson serge pelisses and crimson plush bonnets walked on ahead, each side of the little boy in his sailor suit. For a time nobody said anything, then Moira thought she would be a peacemaker.

"Tell us a story about Trimmer," she suggested.

"Shut up!" cried Selina furiously. Derek was for some reason the last person in the world she wanted to know about Trimmer. Unfortunately he had caught the name.

"Who'th Trimmer?"

"Nobody."

"But he mutht be thomebody"—he began to laugh foolishly—"nobody'th nobody. Do tell me who he ith."

"No, I won't."

"Let me gueth, then."

"No, I won't."

"Let me. Ith he a fairy?"

"No"—Selina almost sobbed—"I tell you she's nobody." Really it was dreadful of Moira to have said that. Now Derek would never stop asking questions, and for the moment she was unable to think how

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she could protect the darling child of her fancy from his degrading surmises.

"I gueth she'th a fairy," he repeated fatuously.

In sheer despair Selina cried:

"Shut up. I've thought of a story."

She hadn't thought of one at all, but began quite at random:

"Once upon a time there was a large family of children . . ."

This was new and delightful to Derek, who could never get anything out of his nurse beyond "I'll tell you a story of Jack-a-Manory." He stopped conjecturing about Trimmer, but trotted silently beside Selina, staring at her as if he could see the words dropping from her mouth.

The story after some hesitations began to move rapidly. Ideas came, not uninspired by her dislike of Derek. The large family of children lived in a house full of ghosts and kept a little boy as a slave. He had to black their boots and wash up their tea-things and keep watch in the house while they went to parties. The ghosts, needless to say, tormented him inconceivably on these vigils, and one day the children came home to find that he himself had been turned into a ghost and made to haunt the bathroom—"and every time they had a bath they could hear him glugging in the tap."

Though not exactly cheered by this recital, Derek was enormously impressed by it.

"Wath it the houth in Denmark Road?" he questioned.

"No, and you're not to say anything about it to

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your nurse, or she won't allow me to tell you a story again."

Not that Selina enjoyed telling stories to Derek, but anything would be better than having to listen to his little piping voice, asking her dreadful questions about Trimmer. On the next walk and the next she had more stories to silence him with, and evidently he gave no hint to his nurse as to their nature, for she became very much more affable—"run on ahead, dear, and tell Derek a pretty story; he loves them so."

Derek had indeed developed a morbid appetite for Selina's stories. He would thrust a little cold paw into her hand and run along beside her, staring into her face with his mouth just open. Whenever Selina looked at him the story took a sadistic leap, and more than once she ended by thoroughly frightening herself as well as her boy friend. Moira did not as a rule listen much, but walked beside the nurses or bowled her hoop.

It was not long before Selina grew tired of all this. Her walks were spoiled by having to tell stories the whole time, and there was no pleasure in frightening Derek since he seemed to enjoy it so much. She came to the conclusion that he must have forgotten Trimmer by this time and that she could give up imitating the lady in the *Arabian Nights*.

"I'm not going to tell you a story today," she said. "I'm going to bowl my hoop."

"Oh, but you mutht!"

"No, I'm tired of telling stories. It's much more fun to play at something."

"I don't think it ith. I like ththorieth betht."

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"Well, I'm not going to tell you one today."

"Oh, but you mutht. If you don't I'll tell Nurth and your nurth that you've been telling me about gothth every day we've been out together."

Selina was caught. She knew that if either of the nurses found out what she had been doing there would be trouble. She was caught; she was in the hands of a skilful and unscrupulous blackmailer. In vain she argued, coaxed, even pleaded. She had to give in and tell him a story; watching Moira out of the corner of her eye who was running gaily with her hoop. She would have to tell him a story every day till he was tired of it—perhaps he would never be tired. . . . A thousand and one dreary morning walks stretched before poor outwitted Scheherazade.

§ 3

But her deliverance came sooner than she expected, and though it brought as many troubles as it took away, these troubles were of their nature transient and not an everlasting doom. In fine, Derek's accumulation of cherished fears became at last too much for him and overwhelmed him with a nightmare. One night both his Nurse and his Mother were brought to his bedside by dismal wails; and then out it all came—a babble of ghosts and empty houses, slaves, hauntings, murders, groans and chains which, now that his love of Selina's storytelling had turned to hate, he loudly and indignantly proclaimed as her inspiration. His mother was horrified, a letter was written to Mrs. South and Selina sent for to the drawing-room.

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"What is this I hear, Selina?"

Derek's mother had written temperately, but she insisted that such tales must stop, as they were having a serious effect on her delicate little boy and she did not think they would be altogether good for the narrator herself. Selina was only too glad to stop them.

"But, Mother, he wouldn't let me. He said he'd tell Nurse and his nurse about them if I didn't go on. So I went on, but he's told all the same. I think he's very mean."

"He had a dreadful nightmare. He was almost ill with it. His mother had to take him to sleep in her room."

"Well, I think he's very mean."

"Selina, I'm surprised at you. You ought to feel sorry for having frightened a delicate little boy so terribly."

"I would be sorry if he hadn't been mean."

Her mother thought it best not to continue the argument, so she sentenced Selina to a jamless tea and a penniless Saturday and sent her back to the nursery.

"I really think she's getting rather naughty," she said later to Nurse, "perhaps we ought to send her to school."

"To the Ladies' College?"

"Yes, we know some nice children there, and she was nine last birthday."

Nurse did not like the idea of Selina's going to school.

"Oh, I think we can manage her at home for a while yet, Ma'am. She's getting on nicely with her lessons, and as for these stories, she must have thought he enjoyed them. I'm sure I thought he did. He

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walked along beside her so good and happy-looking, and he never once took his eyes off her face. Both his nurse and I made sure he was loving it, so I expect she did too."

Thus Nurse stood up for her child behind her back, but to her face she was very grim, and Selina felt herself in disgrace for some hours.

Needless to say this did not make her like Derek any better, and she felt relieved when the next day a tendency to snivel made Nurse decide that she could not go out for the morning walk. The snivel turned into a cold, and she was not allowed out for several days, during which her thoughts of Derek lost gradually their sharp edges, leaving her at last in a state of indifference. He was just one of those tiresome parts of life which one had to accept because one could not avoid them, like milk-pudding and walks on the Front, liquorice powder and the seven-times table. The only thing to do was to forget him except when he was actually there.

But alas! Derek was not to be forgotten as easily as the seven-times table. He was soon forced upon her notice in a new aspect. One day Moira came home from her walk as usual and ran into the drawing-room, where Selina was being "amused" by Mother, as she could not go out.

"Well," said Mother, "and how have you got on today?"

"Oh, all right."

"Did you meet Derek?"

"Yes, we met him outside Budgen's shop and we went for a walk to the fishmarket. Mother, I'm going to marry Derek when I grow up."

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"Oh, indeed! Has he asked you?"

"Yes. Or at least," she amended, "I asked him."

Mother laughed.

"Really! and what made you ask him?"

"I dunno. I just thought I would and he seemed quite pleased. Mother, in Budgen's window they've got teeny weeny little bottles with wine in them. . . ."

She babbled on, and soon afterwards Nurse took them both upstairs.

The next day was so lovely and fine that Dr. South declared it would do Selina good to go out. So she duly set forth with Moira and Nurse, wearing a 'green woollen hug-me-tight under her pelisse. Derek and his nurse appeared at the top of Tower Road and Selina felt quite glad to see them, knowing herself the heroine of the occasion. She would tell Derek how her temperature had gone up to ninety-nine, how she had had black currant tea two nights running and some medicine out of a bottle, and one morning had actually been given her breakfast in bed. She noticed that Derek's nurse was smiling as she came towards them, and prepared herself for one of her friendlier greetings.

But Selina was bitterly disappointed. The nurse's smile and greeting were for Moira.

"Well, and how's Derek's sweetheart?"

Both the nurses laughed.

"Quite well, thank you."

"Did you dream of your true-love last night?"

"No, I dreamed I was in a boat and wearing my new flannel stays."

More laughter, and:

"Oh, I do think you might have dreamed of Derek. He dreamed of you, you know."

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"Did he?"

"Yeth. I dreamed we were at a party, eating itheth."

Everyone still seemed amused, except Selina, who was not amused at all. It was silly the way people went on about being married—she herself could not see anything in it; and anyhow Derek ought to be going to marry her, not Moira, as she was the eldest. The fact that she regarded him as the lowest, loathliest worm on earth did not affect this opinion. She glared balefully at the happy pair, as, encouraged by their nurses, they walked on in front, hand in hand. . . . "Stay here with me, Selina," said Nurse.

Selina walked beside her, full of angry thoughts. She was not angry with Moira, who, after all, was only a very little girl and did not know the meaning of a great many things she did and said; but she was bitterly angry with Derek for having, if only passively, exalted her sister above herself. He was old enough to know what he was doing; and he knew she was the eldest and ought to come first. . . . He must have done it on purpose, because she wasn't there. It was just as she had told Mother—he was mean—mean—mean.

She decided to take her first chance of speaking to him alone, and then either persuade or compel him to acknowledge her just rights. He was not going to escape this time as easily as he had the last.

§ 4

Their next meeting did not take place till nearly a week later, and then it was not at the usual spot but in the Markwick Gardens. The warm weather had come suddenly with a rush of summer days, transform-

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ing a damp and lonely place into a gay and glowing one, bright with flowers and the flowery colours of children's dresses, and musical with the light shiver of their voices on the April air. Selina and Moira were released from crimson serge into blue gingham, from hot, rubbing plush into the shady white crackle of sun-bonnets. It was all lovely—so lovely that Selina felt quite pleased when she saw Derek coming towards them, his sailor suit bleached into white, his H.M.S. *Benbow* encircling the crown of a huge straw hat like a cartwheel at the back of his head.

"Hullo!" he said. "My Nurth ith in the thummer-houth."

"So's ours. Look here, have you ever been in the Gardens before?"

Derek had not. His family had arrived in Hastings during the Autumn, when the Gardens were muddy and desolate. This was his first visit to them, and the little girls were delighted to have the business of showing him round.

Showing him round consisted mainly of pointing out the places he must not go to. "You mustn't go down that little path"—"You mustn't go anywhere near that cottage"—"or those green-houses"—"you mustn't go into that shrubbery where the potting shed is."

To all of which Derek asked: "Why?"

"Because you mustn't," said Selina sternly, giving the answer she was wont to get on such occasions.

"But why muthn't I?"

"We all mustn't. Nobody goes into the potting shed—even the Cliffords didn't when they were here."

"But why?"

Selina felt angry with his foolish questioning of time-

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honoured taboos and broke into Moira's effort to explain with:

"Because they're full of ghosts."

"Gothth!"

"Yes—the cottage, the potting-shed, all of them. That's why you mustn't go near. But it's all right"—catching a glint in his eye that reminded her of earlier troubles—"they never come out. You'll be quite safe as long as you don't go near them."

Derek appeared satisfied and the next hour passed amicably enough. Neither he nor Moira seemed to remember their betrothal, and the nurses must have forgotten it too, for their nods and becks had ceased. If Selina had been wise she would have let the matter drop; but unfortunately this did not even occur to her. She was still as determined as ever to vindicate her position as the eldest, and was only waiting for Moira to go off and leave her alone with Derek before confronting him with her claims.

In the end she did not wait even for that. They were all three standing on the edge of the Tennis Lawn, contemplating the mossy descent of the steps, when she suddenly burst out:

"Look here, Derek; you oughtn't to have said you'd marry Moira before you'd asked me."

"But she athked me firtht."

"I don't care. I'm the eldest, and have got to be married first; so you must choose me."

"But I don't want to marry you."

"Why?" Selina was indignant and aghast.

"Becauth I don't like you ath much ath Moira."

"Why?"

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"Becaith you frighten me . . . you tell me horrid thtthorieth ——"

"Derek, how dare you! You *made* me tell those stories."

"I didn't! I didn't. At leatht, I didn't know they were going to frighten me, and anyhow you began before I wouldn't let you thtop."

"Well, I think you're the rudest . . ."

Her voice broke, tears were coming, and she ran away.

§ 5

For the rest of the afternoon she wandered about gloomily by herself. She felt insulted and injured, and wished now that she hadn't said anything to Derek about marriage. But it had seemed so obvious to remind him of her dues . . . and now he was still going to marry Moira and had been rude to her into the bargain—and unjust . . . he was a dreadful little sneak and storyteller, and she wished he'd never come to live in Hastings. He was spoiling everything—even the Gardens.

She prowled round among the flower-beds, trying to take her usual pleasure from the Spring growth of tulips and daffodils. But it was no good—the Gardens were spoilt like everything else. It was a shame. Some day she would ask Mother if they need go out with Derek any more.

Then she heard Nurse calling her, and would have turned with a certain relief to thoughts of home and tea had she not at the same moment surprisingly caught sight of Derek stealing alone into the shrubbery that

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surrounded the potting-shed. There were two big shrubberies on the Flower Lawn, one concealing the swing-house and the other the shed where the gardener kept his tools and paraphernalia. For a moment she thought Derek had mistaken the forbidden for the unforbidden, but there was something hasty and furtive about his attitude which made her doubt it . . . besides, only an hour ago he had been well aware of the distinction—and what was he doing, creeping about like this alone?

She determined to watch him, and without his seeing her she followed him into the little winding path that led through laurustinus and euonymus to the forbidden shed. There could now be no mistake as to his evil intentions; he had opened the door and was looking in. Selina felt shocked and indignant. She was sure that he had gone to see if there were really any ghosts. . . . He pretended to be afraid of ghosts, just to get her into trouble, and yet he was full of curiosity and excitement about them.

He stood looking into the shed, unaware that anyone was watching him; then he went in altogether. Selina was disgusted. There was something impious about his indifference to well-established rules. He was a horrid, hateful, wicked little boy, and someone ought to punish him. . . . Running up silently behind him she shut the door with a bang and turned the key in the lock.

At the same moment Nurse's voice came loudly from somewhere quite near.

"Selina! Selina! Where are you?"

Her heart beat quickly as she ran back to the lawn, afraid that Nurse would see where she came from; but Nurse was still on the other side of the summer-house.

"Oh, there you are! Where have you been? I've been

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calling you for ages. I've a treat for you. Mrs. Roseberry has asked if we may go back there to tea. She's sent round to Mother, and Mother says you may, so come along now quickly, they're all waiting. You can wash your hands when you get there."

"Is Derek asked too?"

"No, not this time. But never mind—you'll be seeing him tomorrow. Come along at once."

Selina came along at once, only too glad to be out of the Gardens before her misdeed was discovered. For she now saw it was a misdeed, and not the just vengeance she had at first mistaken it for. She ought not to have locked Derek into the potting-shed, and for that very reason she could do nothing to let him out.

§ 6

The distractions of an unfamiliar nursery, with the delights of cake for tea and musical chairs afterwards, were successful in keeping his situation for some time at the back of her mind. But when she was home again, having her bath and going to bed, thoughts of him began first to disturb and then to overwhelm her.

What had happened? Had anyone heard him crying and let him out? If they had, she was undone, for he would certainly betray her. On the other hand, if he was not let out—and she thought it doubtful that his cries would reach the world outside the shrubbery—he might die of fright or cold or starvation. She herself was sure she would die if she was shut up in the potting-shed all night, and Derek was supposed to be delicate. . . .

As the minutes passed she became more and more

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convinced that he would not be let out. She knew nothing of gardening, and it seemed to her only the vaguest chance that the gardener would visit the potting-shed before night. Derek's nurse would certainly never think of looking for him there. Selina saw her going home forlornly to tell her mistress that her little boy was lost . . . perhaps they had gone back to the Gardens and roamed about them calling his name, until at last tired and disheartened they returned home to sob themselves to sleep.

"Selina, what on earth's the matter? Are you crying?"

"No, I'm not."

"But your eyes are full of tears."

"No—it's the gas shining into them."

She hoped that was not a story. But like many a criminal she found that one evil action led to another.

"Nurse," she asked a few moments later, "how long does it take to starve to death?"

"Now, Selina, don't let's have any silly questions to-night."

"But how long? I want to know."

"Well, it all depends."

She might have known Nurse would say that.

"Would it take two days?"

"I've told you I won't have these questions. Come now and say your prayers."

Selina prayed fervently, remaining on her knees for some moments after her public petitions were ended. But even her prayers were infected with her double dilemma. She knew that if Derek was left all night in the potting-shed it would be her fault—she ought to tell Nurse or Mother that he was there, and someone would at once go over and let him out. But she simply

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had not the courage. No, he might starve to death before she spoke. . . . "Oh, God," she prayed, "please let him out without me having to do anything."

The fact that she had never received any punishment more severe than early bed-time or some slight deprivation was no check at all on her fears. She knew that she had never done such a wicked thing before; even the time when she had thrown Nurse's umbrella into the duck pond at Platnix seemed a small, pale naughtiness beside it. If her crime was discovered no doubt something awful would happen to her. There was a song called "Wicked Tom," which Mother sometimes sang in the drawing-room when they went downstairs after tea—Wicked Tom who ill treated dogs and cats, and to whom the Judge said:

"He must be whipped and sent to bed
And kept there for a week,
And only fed on stalest bread
And not allowed to speak."

Selina saw nothing less as the reward of her iniquity.

Indeed, a retributive Providence could have done no better than hand her over to the terrors of her own imagination, which had soon painted the scene for her in colours seven times brighter than life or death. As she lay in bed her terrors wavered between her own fate and her victim's. It was not so much for Derek himself she felt as for his nurse and mother—soon her fancy had run wild over the sufferings of those two. For once that she saw him crying for his home and his tea, she saw them a dozen times, wandering through the dark, forsaken streets, or weeping in each other's arms by the dying nursery fire.

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When, shortly after ten o'clock, Nurse came in to bed, she found Selina sitting up, with an anxious, wakeful look on her face.

"Selina, what *are* you doing?"

"Nurse, I've had an awful dream."

It was the only way she could think of to save Derek, and by this time she did not care if she told the truth or not.

"Never mind, dear. Forget all about it. Lie down and go to sleep again."

Again! What would Nurse say if she knew that she had never been to sleep at all?

"I dreamed Derek was shut up in the potting-shed in the Gardens."

"Well, Derek's lying fast asleep in bed, just as you ought to be."

"Nurse, are you *sure* it was a dream?"

"Sure! Why, of course I am. Now, don't be silly, dear."

Selina tried again.

"Nurse, I suppose you wouldn't like to go over to the Gardens and just *see* that he isn't there—just make sure, I mean."

"No, I wouldn't! Who ever heard of such a thing. It's ten o'clock at night. Really, Selina, you mustn't be so silly even if you *have* had a bad dream. Lie down and go to sleep again at once."

"But, Nurse——"

"Not another word. Do as I tell you, or I shall be angry."

Selina lay down, defeated. She had hoped much from this scheme, in which she imagined that she would not figure as anything more sinister than a little girl who

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had astonishing and mysterious warnings sent her in dreams. But the scheme had failed like everything else. There was nothing more she could think of to save Derek from a night in the potting-shed. All she could do was to forget him and go to sleep, which, surprising as it may seem, she did at once.

§ 7

When she woke daylight was in the room—daylight without as yet the full sanctions of day. She sat up, her heart suddenly bumping with the thought of Derek. It had come to her at once, with the moment of waking, and yet when its first wild pang was over, it did not seem such a bitter thought as it had seemed last night. For one thing, darkness did not muffle her up with it and she did not have to think of Derek in the dark. That nightmare was over.

Also, with the day she felt more resolute. She seemed more her own mistress in daylight—more independent. She realised that there was nothing to prevent her creeping over to the Markwick Gardens before anybody was awake and letting him out herself. . . . She could swear him to secrecy as a condition of her doing so; or perhaps it would be better just to push the door open and run away—she could be back in bed again before Nurse woke up.

The plan, which would have seemed terrifying and impossible last night, by daylight appeared no worse than adventurous—something that Madcap Maisie might have done in the Little Folks serial. Why shouldn't she be like Madcap Maisie for a change? . . . She had never in her life been out of the house alone,

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nor had she ever entirely dressed herself; nor was she in herself a daring child. . . . But her terrors had made her desperate. She must do something now, or she might never be able to do anything at all. Even if Nurse took her and Moira into the Gardens that morning she might find it impossible to dodge her watchful eye — “What are you doing, Selina? You know you’re not allowed to go in there. . . .” She could almost hear her saying it. No, she must act at once, or Derek might have to stay in the potting-shed indefinitely.

The alarm clock on Nurse’s dressing-table told her that it was a quarter to six, that is to say she had exactly an hour before the household came to life. An hour ought to be long enough for her expedition. . . . She slipped out of bed and across the room to the chair where her clothes lay folded, keeping an anxious eye on Nurse’s bed, watching it for any sign or movement. There was none; Nurse lay in the gathering light, peacefully asleep, and Selina was just going to lift her clothes off the chair when she was reminded that Nurse was not the only occupant of the room, not the only person it would be dangerous to wake up. . . . Between the bars of Moira’s cot a pair of bright eyes watched her intently.

“Hullo,” said Moira.

“Hush,” implored Selina.

This was dreadful. To have wakened Moira amounted practically to waking Nurse. What could she do? She tiptoed over to the cot and whispered anxiously:

“Oh, Moira, please, please do lie down and go to sleep again. I’m going out, and I don’t want Nurse to know.”

“Where are you going?”

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"Over to the Gardens—to let Derek out of the potting-shed."

"Is Derek in the potting-shed?" Moira seemed interested.

"Yes, I locked him in yesterday, and now I must go and let him out before anybody knows."

"What fun! I'll come too."

Selina nearly wept.

"Oh Moira, you can't."

"Yes, I can. Let's both go. I'll fasten up your clothes and you'll fasten up mine. I want to see Derek in the potting-shed."

Selina realised that Moira would have to come; if she refused to let her, she would certainly wake Nurse. Also she realised that her company would not be altogether a disadvantage. To have Moira tie up her strings and fasten her buttons would solve the problem of dressing, and it would be a comfort to have somebody—though no more than a little sister—beside one in the lonely adventure of crossing the road, entering the Gardens, unlocking the potting-shed and finding—what? . . .

"All right. Come along then. But don't make a noise, and be quick."

Moira came quickly, even more alive than Selina to the requirements of the situation. It was she who suggested carrying their clothes into the day nursery so that they should not risk waking Nurse while they dressed. Two little figures in Jaeger sleeping-suits crept out of the room, each with a trailing bundle under its arm.

Once in the day nursery they discovered that certain articles of clothing had either been left behind or

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dropped on the way. But it was too risky to go back and look for them, so they dressed as best they could—Moira short of a sock and her flannel petticoat, Selina perilously without her combinations. There was no time for washing, or for brushing their hair, and they had forgotten to bring any outdoor clothes or shoes. They set off downstairs, two unkempt little figures, with tousled heads and overalls buttoned awry.

Selina was by this time quite reconciled to her sister's company. Not only was Moira's attitude of cheerful interest a relief to her sick fears, but she showed practical gifts that more than once saved their expedition from disaster. For instance, directly they tried to open the front door they found, not unnaturally, that it was locked and the key nowhere to be seen. Selina was appalled: "We shall have to jump out of the dining-room window." But round Senlac Lodge ran the deep fosse of its area, making any escape that way as impossible as over a castle moat.

"I know," said Moira, "Mother takes it every night and hides it in the little cupboard behind the umbrellas."

And there it was, sure enough, though Selina herself would never have found it. Thanks to a well-oiled lock Moira was able to open the door that for nearly a whole minute had threatened their enterprise, and the freedom of the street lay before them.

Denmark Road seemed a vast thoroughfare to Selina that morning—vast and rather strange, with the faint colours of early day lying about it, and not a single person or horse or cart in sight. . . . Nothing but herself and Moira, who also looked strange as they ran across it in their unaccustomed hatlessness and untidiness—two queer, ragamuffin children, that she almost

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felt afraid of. . . . It was cold, too. . . . With a shudder she remembered that people can die of cold as well as of starvation.

They had not brought the key of the Gardens with them, but there was really no need for it, as the bars of the gate were so far apart that it was easy to scramble through if you were not too particular about tearing your clothes on the spikes that the Gardens Committee had fixed there to prevent such entrances. They were in the damp, quiet garden, uncertainly alight, with cold unexpected shadows on the grass. Even in that desperate moment Selina thrilled to a new beauty.

But soon everything was wiped out of her by the fear of what she might find in the potting-shed. Her teeth chattered and her legs shook as her feet squelched over grass unfamiliarly wet with dew.

"I 'spect Derek 'ull be hungrey," said Moira, "he won't have had any tea, or supper—he always has Robbs' biscuits and milk for supper."

Selina said nothing.

"Perhaps he'll have found something to eat," continued her sister—"potatoes or grass or something. Oh, S'lina, I know now why you asked Nurse how long it took people to starve to death. I don't s'pose Derek will have starved to death yet, will he?"

"No. . . . Oh, no. . . ."

"Do you think he'll be very thin? Do you think he'll have turned into a skelington?"

"Oh, do shut up."

Moira's bright chatter had ceased to comfort her. When they entered the forbidden shrubbery she felt as if she might be sick at any moment. . . . She could hardly force her feet along the hateful little path, and

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when they reached the shed she stood for a moment trembling in front of the locked door that seemed like a bad thing out of her dreams. At last with cold hands she turned the key, in her mind a new picture—of Derek gone mad with fright, capering and dancing up and down with a hideous grinning face. . . .

"Oh, God," she prayed, "don't let me see anything dreadful when I open the door."

§ 8

Her prayer was answered so literally that at first she felt almost disappointed. After all she had been through and all she had screwed herself up to face it was something in the nature of an anti-climax to see only a neat and empty shed, with flower pots stacked upon the shelves and a few watering cans and a wheelbarrow standing by. Moira expressed her feelings openly.

"Hullo," she cried in a resentful voice, "he isn't here at all."

"Where ever is he?" wailed Selina. "Where ever can he have got to?"

"Perhaps he went out of that door."

"Which door?"

"That little door over there."

Selina saw a door at the far end of the shed, but when she went over to it she found that it was locked.

"He can't have got out that way—it's locked."

"Perhaps the gardener let him out."

"He may have."

She felt her old feelings of anger and dislike returning, and with them returned all the normal fears of her nature—fears of the lonely gardens and the empty

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morning and of this unhallowed adventure on which she had embarked so fruitlessly.

"Let's go home," she said in a quavering voice, and ran shakily towards the gate.

Moira followed her, still disappointed rather than alarmed.

"I wonder how he got out. Perhaps the gardener heard him crying."

Her sister said nothing, but hurried on.

"I 'spect he heard him crying," repeated Moira.

"Oh do be quick!" cried Selina nervously; "perhaps we can get back into bed before Nurse wakes up."

But such a fond delusion quickly perished. Senlac Lodge was visible from the gate, and no sooner had the little girls scrambled through, than they saw that the whole household was awake.

"Hullo!" said Moira. "There's Cook in the road."

The road seemed to be full of people—not only Cook, but Rose, as well as Mother and Nurse and the milkman's boy and even Baa. Selina's picture of Derek's nurse and mother in their reactions to his loss might well have been corrected in the light of her own family's behaviour—had she ever been disposed to correct fancy with fact.

"There they are!" cried Rose suddenly.

Selina's first impulse was to run back into the Gardens, but she saw the uselessness of such a course and continued to advance unsteadily.

"Children!" cried Mother in a strange voice and came running towards them.

They met in the middle of the road. Mother looked very queer, and kissed them both. Then she suddenly changed and became angry.

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"You naughty girls!" she cried. "Where have you been?"

"Come in at once," said Nurse, who had followed Mother out into the road. "You look like ragamuffins. Moira, you've only one sock on."

"And Selina hasn't got any combinations."

"Come in at once, you naughty little girls—you'll catch your death of cold."

"What on earth were you doing in the Gardens?"

Selina began to cry, and Moira piped:

"We'd gone to rescue Derek."

But the question had been merely rhetorical, and no one noticed Moira's answer. The procession formed itself and swept into the house; first Nurse, leading Selina, then Mother carrying Moira, then Cook and Rose. Baa and the milkman's boy whistled to each other.

As they entered the hall, they saw their Father turn away from the telephone.

"Well, dear, they're not there . . . Hullo! Here they are!"

His face was transfigured at once with beaming joy. He came forward and kissed them.

"Don't cry, pets. Where have you been?"

"They've been in the Gardens," said Mother. "I've never heard of anything so naughty."

"Thought you'd like a little run before breakfast? But you shouldn't have gone without Nurse."

"We were rescuing Derek," repeated Moira, and was heard at last.

"Derek!—what has *he* got to do with it?"

"I've just been speaking to Derek's mother on the telephone," said Father; "when we couldn't find you,

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we thought you might have popped over there for a visit."

"And was Derek at home?"

"At home! Of course he was, and still in bed."

"What on earth do you mean, Selina?" Father and Mother's voices came almost together.

Selina's tears burst out afresh. She felt too shattered and frightened to struggle any longer with a deception which she knew she could not keep up.

"I—I thought he was in the p-p-potting-shed."

"How could you think such a thing?"

"Because I shut him in there."

There was a short electric silence. Then Nurse said "Ah" in a meaning voice.

"Look here, Selina," said Mother, "you're to tell me all about it—at once."

"I—I shut Derek into the p-p-potting-shed yesterday afternoon."

"What ever made you do such a naughty thing?"

"He was horrid to me, and rude, he—he insulted me—and he'd no business to go into the potting-shed at all. We'd told him he mustn't. But he went, so I ran after him and shut the door. And—and then I—I was frightened he'd die, so I went over this morning to let him out."

Once again Mother behaved strangely.

"Oh tell me," she cried, "what I've done to deserve such children!"

Even Father seemed annoyed.

"Go upstairs with Nurse," he said—then to Mother: "We'd better telephone again and find out exactly what's happened."

Selina went upstairs sobbing loudly, but became quiet

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when she found that she could not cry and listen to Mother telephoning at the same time. In those days telephones were unusual and difficult to manage. It was a long time before the "Hullo" and "Are you there" had ceased and a proper conversation began, and then of course she could only hear half of it.

"Is that Mrs. Foxe? . . . Oh, yes . . . I beg your pardon, I didn't quite hear . . . yes, yes, they are—five minutes ago . . . I'm sorry, I didn't hear that . . . Yes, please, I want to ask you . . ."

At this juncture Nurse shut the nursery door.

Both children had to be undressed and redressed, as well as washed and combed and brushed. It was all a great bore, especially as Nurse was scolding all the while. Just as they were wearily buttoning their overalls for the second time that day, Mother came into the room. She looked much less angry, and spoke in almost her usual voice.

"Well, it's turned out all right, Selina—which is more than you deserve. I managed to speak to Mrs. Foxe and she told me that Derek did go into the potting-shed yesterday" (of course he did! there was no need to tell her that!) "and he says he noticed the door bang behind him, but there was another door opposite —"

"Mother, it was locked."

"Don't interrupt, dear. I expect the gardener locked it when he shut up the shed for the night. Anyhow it was open then, so he went out that way."

"Then he never was shut up at all?"

"No—the other door was open, so he walked out; and he certainly didn't know you were anywhere near him. But that doesn't make it any less wrong of you

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to have done such an unkind thing, and as a punishment I shan't let you go to a little tea-party he is giving next Friday."

Selina's face was crimson and she felt as if she would burst, but these symptoms were not caused by her punishment, which indeed had hardly reached her real consciousness. All she could think of was that Derek's nurse and mother had never roamed the streets looking for him, there had never been the slightest risk of his dying or of his being even a little ill. . . . He had not suffered at all—he had not even known that he was locked in. She had endured those hours of remorse and fear and agony for nothing.

"Oh, Mother," she cried, "he's mean—he's mean! Oh, I told you he was mean!—He's the meanest person that was ever born."

CHAPTER TEN

The First Day at School

§ I

SELINA AND MOIRA HAD KNOWN THE OUTSIDE OF THE Ladies' College for as long as they could remember. It stood on the opposite side of the road, a little way down the hill—an imposing, red-brick mansion rising out of a surprisingly small playground. From it came unceasingly a flood of music, the tinkle of two pianos that were never still. Sometimes only one piano would play, sometimes they played together; if both music rooms were occupied a fine mixture of scales and exercises, or, perhaps, of the Merry Peasant and Rachmaninoff's Prelude would flow out across the road and in at the nursery windows.

Now and then people complained of the noise, but to the little girls it was always delightful, especially in summer when all the windows were open. In Selina's mind this summer jangle shared the romance of their yearly visit to Platnix Farm, so constantly and closely was it associated with it. On warm July afternoons a

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little figure in a blue overall would wander in a cramped seaside garden, blissfully hoping and planning and dreaming, to a crashing obligato of five-finger exercises . . . *Tum*, tum, tum tum, *tum*, tum tum, tum; whenever she heard that sound, even to the end of her life, she would think of Platnix and the barns and the oasts and the green fields of adventure.

The inside of the college was less familiar. They had been in it only once—to see Baa receive a prize for history. She had never repeated this exploit, which had taken place two or three years ago, so Selina had only hazy memories of a vast hall, a ceiling with bars of gas-jets flaming against its perilous heights, and a large, shiny staircase mounting into the Unknown.

It was therefore definitely exciting, a little alarming and altogether delightful to hear her mother say she was to go to school next term.

“I hadn’t meant to send you till you were ten, but I’ve been talking to Miss Pope, and she thinks you’re quite old enough to start now. I told her where you’d got to in arithmetic.”

She did not say that she had also told Miss Pope that Selina was growing rather too naughty for the nursery and needed the discipline of governesses and the healthy snubbing of children of her own age as a supplement to the moralisings of Nurse and the antagonisms of Moira.

“You’ll go only in the morning at first,” she continued; “they do Preparation in the afternoons, but you can quite well do yours at home after tea. I don’t want you to miss your walk.”

Selina was perfectly satisfied. To go to school at all

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was adventure enough for her at present. She took her first opportunity of telling Baa.

"Baa, I'm to go to school."

"You mean to the College?"

"Yes. Mother says I'm ——"

"Well, if you mean the College, say the College. The College isn't the same as a school—it's a College."

"What's the difference between a college and a school?"

"Oh, they're quite different. Miss Pratt's is a school, and Miss Tottenham's, but the College is a college."

Selina felt herself in possession of an important fact.

§ 2

The Autumn term began only two days after the children's return from Platnix, so preparations were hurried and slight. Mother, who had been as usual in Switzerland while they were at the farm, took Selina to Weston's, the big shop in Hastings, and bought her a fawn stuff pelisse and a brown jellybag cap. Neither of these garments was particularly beautiful or becoming, but they had two great advantages—they marked the first time that (except for the greenery-yallery dress) Selina had worn different clothes from Moira, and the first time she had worn anything (except shoes, of course) out of a shop.

Hitherto all her clothes, even her coats and hats and muffs, had been made by Nurse, who also knitted her socks. But Nurse could not do much sewing while they were at Platnix, as the sewing machine was too big to take with them; so her only contribution to Selina's school trousseau was the making over of her mother's

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old waterproof cape to her use. There was enough good material left in it to make a full-length cape for a little girl, and if it looked rather shabby and entirely shapeless there was the compensating fact that it was the first waterproof she had ever possessed.

She had occasion to wear it at the start. The twenty-second of September dawned uncertainly under heavy showers, a day emphatically demanding a waterproof, and also, Nurse said, a warm serge frock. Selina had wakened in spirits that no showers could damp, in a glow of eager anticipation undimmed by the smallest note of foreboding or fear. She had a feeling that she was taking a very definite step forward out of little girlhood; she was going to begin something that was entirely new, and also, she felt sure, perfectly delightful. She saw the College as a social rather than as an educational establishment, a sort of continuous party, with its crowd of girls of all ages. If she thought of lessons at all, she thought of them as an added adventure—very different from her hours of boredom with Nurse. Moira, amateurishly struggling with her egg at the nursery breakfast table, and looking forward to nothing more splendid than a morning spent with Nurse and the Royal Reader, seemed a very little girl—almost a baby. Selina was leaving Moira behind: she had a definite sensation of leaving her. It was queer and exciting to say, “Good-bye, Moira,” as she went out.

The only flaw in an otherwise perfect occasion was Mother’s insistence that Nurse should go with her.

“I want her to go with you the first morning and see that you’re all right. If I have a good account of you, you may go with Baa tomorrow, and in time I expect you’ll be able to run across alone.”

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Selina was disappointed, but not cast down. She put on her new waterproof with a definite sense of pride and pleasure. The really painful moment came when she had nearly reached the College and saw that Nurse was heading, not for the Students' Entrance in Denmark Road, but for the gate marked Visitors.

"Nurse, that's not the proper way in."

"It's the way we went in last time."

"But then we were going to the Prize Giving—we were visitors. Now I'm a student."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Nurse in a maddening voice. "Anyhow, I'm not. I'm going to take you in properly and hand you over to Miss Pope."

"Nurse, you can't—you can't!"

Selina felt desperate. Already they were crossing the stream of girls that was pouring in at the Students' Entrance. But for those girls she would have cried or stamped her foot and screamed at Nurse, who was spoiling everything. As it was she could do nothing. She could only walk behind her up the steps to the visitors' door.

A maid answered the bell.

"I've brought this little girl to school," said Nurse. "Can I —"

"Will you take her round to the other entrance, please."

"But I want to see Miss Pope."

"I don't think she can see you now."

Nurse was angry—Selina could see that by the way her face turned pink. "Will you kindly ask her," she said in a voice that seemed to come out of the top of her head.

The maid left them standing there in the doorway.

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Selina was aware of other girls passing along the road on their way to the Students' Entrance. She could feel them staring at her. It was awful. Oh, when would the maid come back?

She did not come at all, but instead came a young, pleasant looking Mistress, wearing a very neat blouse and skirt.

"I'm sorry you can't see Miss Pope now," she said. "She's engaged. Has this little girl come to the College?"

"Yes, she's Mrs. South's little girl."

"Oh, I know—I've heard about her. Your name's Selina, isn't it?"

"Yes, thank you."

"I'm Miss Daybell. If you come with me I'll take you to the dressing-room."

Selina, with Nurse still persistently in attendance, followed her down a wide flight of stairs, up which girls were coming from the dressing-room. She had once more to swim, as it were, against a stream of curious glances. All these girls would know that she had come into College by the wrong door.

The dressing-room was crowded, but not noisy. Talking was forbidden, and the only sound seemed to be the crackle of rubber waterproofs. All the girls were wearing waterproofs cut in the "Newmarket" style, with yoke and sleeves; Selina looked round in vain for a cape like hers—she could not see a single one. She soon realised, too, that hers was the only jellybag cap; everybody else wore a sailor hat with the College ribbon . . . for some reason that she could not explain these differences made her feel inferior. Then, to crown all,

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Nurse would talk; in the silence her voice could be heard all over the room.

"Now, be sure not to get any ink on your pinafore, for it must last you till Friday whatever happens. And have you got your handkerchief? That's right. Now I'll be off; and Moira and I will be waiting for you outside at one o'clock. You'll be able to put on your outdoor things by yourself, won't you?"

"Yes," mumbled Selina, staring at the ground.

Nurse felt sorry for her, not in the least understanding the cause of her dejection. She put it down to shyness and fright, which she considered highly suitable emotions on such an occasion. She would have been surprised and disappointed could she have guessed that they were in no way responsible for Selina's shuffling foot and downcast eye. She was not much given to tenderness and she knew that kisses were not approved of in the nursery, but, moved by compassion for the forlorn little figure standing so pathetically on the threshold of a new life, she stooped and kissed her.

Selina turned red to her very ears. The nightmare had reached a stage when, had it been a real one, she would have waked up feeling sick. But alas! there was no such merciful escape from the present moment. She had to stand there and watch Nurse pick up her umbrella, pull down her veil and walk out. The only comfort was that she did walk out, without waving her hand or any other display of singularity.

§ 3

The stream of girls still flowed up the stairs, and this time Selina was moving with it, a disconsolate

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minnow among established perch. The stream carried her into the sea—the sea that murmured and eddied against the walls of the gymnasium. The great hall was full of girls of all ages, and she looked round it eagerly for a familiar face. The only girl at the College whom she actually knew was Baa, but there must certainly be others whom she knew by sight—whom she had met at parties or seen playing in the Markwick Gardens. It seemed incredible that the borough of Hastings should contain so many girls that she did not know.

Then suddenly a voice spoke at her elbow.

“Hullo!”

She turned round, full of hope and relief, to see two girls standing beside her arm in arm. They appeared about eleven years old, but wore very grown-up looking blouses, with stiff collars and ties, and trim belts at their waists. One of them was dark, with a face rather like a cat, round and big-eyed; the other was fair, with sharp, ratty features. Selina did not think she had ever seen either of them before.

“Hullo,” she answered politely.

“What’s your name?” asked Cat-face.

“Selina.”

“Selina what?”

“Selina South.”

“How old are you?” asked Rat-face.

“Nine.”

“Then why do you wear socks?”

This was a dreadful question, and Selina did not know how to answer it.

“Mother makes me,” she mumbled.

Cat-face and Rat-face looked at each other and jointly decided that Selina had said something funny.

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"Mother makes me," "Mother makes me," they mimicked, and laughed with their heads together. Then Cat-face said:

"Be sure not to get any ink on your pinafore."

Rat-face chimed in:

"For it's got to last you till Friday, whatever happens."

And they marched off, leaving Selina speechless and sick with shame; indeed, she had to struggle with a tear as she watched them walk away, still arm in arm, spluttering to each other—"Whatever happens, my dear—*whatever* happens."

Poor Selina! She had never imagined that this could happen. Her experience held nothing like it. At parties there had often been little quarrels and rivalries, but never anything like this. Those girls had been rude to her on purpose: they had laughed at her and made fun of her for no reason at all that she could see, except that they enjoyed doing it. And it wasn't her fault that her clothes were different from everyone else's. She would have given anything to be dressed like the others.

Up till now clothes had not played a very important part in her life. They had loomed largely only when she dirtied or tore them. Neither at parties nor in the Markwick Gardens had she noticed any great difference between herself and other children, and if there had been a difference certainly no one had ever taken any notice of it. Now she could think of nothing but the fact that she looked different from everyone else. With a dawning resentment she wondered why Mother had not dressed her like other schoolgirls. The pelisse and jellybag of which she had felt so proud an hour ago now seemed to her squalid garments, unworthy of the

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College. And her indoor clothes were no better. No one of her own age was wearing a pinafore; some of the very little ones wore them, but her contemporaries were all bloused and skirted like their elders. Her eye was too envious and inexpert to see that, so dressed, they looked remarkably like monkeys; all she saw was that she stood among them wearing the uniform of a little girl. She had socks, too, instead of stockings. Everyone would take her for much younger than she was.

Not thus had she pictured her first day at school. She had imagined herself taking her place in an older world than the world of the nursery, instead of which she seemed definitely younger. If only she could see Baa . . . she felt that her position would be much improved could she be seen talking to a big girl of fifteen. The clock on the wall pointed almost to nine; surely Baa would not be late on the first day of the term. Yet she searched in vain for her familiar face and pigtail.

Then suddenly she caught sight of her standing near the gallery stairs, surrounded by a group of big girls who partly hid her from view. They were all talking and laughing together, and perhaps Selina would have been wise not to go near them; but she could not resist the chance of speaking to Baa, and she ran up, calling her name in tones of delight and entreaty.

"Baa . . . Baa."

"Hullo! What's this?— 'Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool?'"

All the girls were laughing, though laughing good-humouredly—all except Baa, whose face was thunderous with rebuke.

"Hullo, kid! Who told *you* you could barge in here?"

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And don't call me by that idiotic name. I'm not that at College."

"What are you, then?"

"Una, of course. You know that as well as I do. This kid lives next door to me," she explained to her companions, "and sometimes I go in and amuse her and her baby sister."

"Seems a bit cocky," said one of the girls.

"Yes, she is, but I expect that'll soon be knocked out of her. Do you know what form you're in, Selina?"

"No, I don't."

"You *ought* to be in the second at your age, but I don't suppose you've got far enough in arithmetic."

"I can do things with pounds, shillings and pence."

Some of the girls laughed.

"What can you do with them?"

Selina was going to answer when a bell rang suddenly, and at once the room was in commotion. The talking ceased and girls seemed to be hurrying in all directions. A mistress came and sat at the piano, and a group of girls formed itself round her; the others, meanwhile, arranged themselves in long lines across the room. Selina, not knowing where to go, kept close to Baa, a small bewildered satellite pursuing a big, oblivious sun. It was not till Baa had taken her place in a row behind the vaulting horse, and was rummaging in her satchel for her prayer-book, that she noticed Selina beside her. Once more her countenance darkened.

"You can't stand here," she whispered hoarsely.

"Oh, Baa, do let me. I don't know where to go."

"You can't stay here. *This is the fifth form.*"

Everyone was looking at them now, and somebody said: "Hush! Who's talking?" Then a mistress seemed

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to realise what had happened, and taking Selina by the hand led her, blushing and mortified, to the front row of all, among the very little ones who wore socks and pinafores like hers. . . .

§ 4

It was fortunate that Prayers began at once, for prayer seemed her only refuge in such a dreadful situation. Nothing but contact with the dim, kindly world she sensed beyond the frustrations and humiliations of this could comfort her now. At first she had tried desperately to create a compensating image of Trimmer dressed immaculately in a snow-white blouse with a stand-up collar, a forget-me-not blue tie and a navy blue serge skirt, taking her place augustly with the sixth form, though only nine years old; but it had faded in the hot glare of her own shame, and bowing her head upon her folded hands she prayed desperately for relief. The kindergarten mistress, kneeling behind her, was impressed by so much infantile devotion; Miss Daybell, two rows further back, hoped that Selina South was not a little prig. The feelings of both would have been modified could they have guessed the nature of her petition, which was indeed more like a drapery list than a prayer.

"Please God, make Mother give me a Newmarket waterproof and a sailor hat—one with the College hat-band round it; and please may she give me a proper blouse and skirt, with a collar and a belt and a safety-pin, and a real tie; and may I never have to wear socks any more. Amen."

Prayers were ended, and she rose from her knees,

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feeling very much better. There was at least a chance that her prayer might be answered—her faith was unable to soar higher than that—and meanwhile the sun had come out and was pouring in through the gymnasium windows, and the mistress at the piano was playing a gay march-tune, to which the girls filed out to their class-rooms. Soon Selina found herself in a cheerful room on the first floor, sitting at a business-like desk of her own, and receiving further comfort from the information that she was in the second form, though she would have to go down to the first for arithmetic.

Before the morning was over, heaven had indeed given her back much of her lost self-respect; for though it did not immediately supply the goods demanded—in fact by the time she had most of them desire had failed and fashion had changed—it provided her with a chance to rehabilitate herself, in her own eyes at least. This chance did not come in the ordinary course of learning—in which, indeed, she made no very brilliant display—but, perhaps more appropriately, through the College Mission.

That was the first term of the College's association with the United Girls' Schools' Mission, and Miss Pope made a round of the classes to talk to the girls about the work and settle the amount of the subscriptions. The occasion opened inauspiciously with an enquiry as to how much everyone had a week.

"Is there anyone here getting more than a shilling a week?"

Selina looked round her, scarcely believing that the class could contain such wealth, and marvelled to see a fair, lanky girl in the back row put up her hand.

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"Gladys is the only one getting more than a shilling. I shan't ask how much. Who gets a shilling?"

Two girls put up their hands.

It seemed incredible that two little girls of nine or ten could have a shilling a week each. But evidently the form was richer than Selina had imagined; out of eighteen children, one had more than a shilling a week, two a shilling, two ninepence, while no less than eight had sixpence.

And still it went on; or rather, still it went down—down, Selina felt, to the inevitable exposure of her Saturday's penny. In money as in clothing she would be publicly proclaimed inferior to the rest. The sum declined past two rentiers of threepence and a little girl mysteriously endowed with two pence halfpenny to Miss Pope's final remark:

"I suppose there's nobody here getting *less* than twopence a week."

Nobody moved or spoke, nobody put up a hand, and the headmistress continued briskly:

"Very well, then; I think that means we can fix the lowest subscription from this form at threepence a week."

There was an assenting murmur.

"And the highest at sixpence."

Everyone seemed to agree.

"That's settled, then. I'll take the names."

She went down the form list. "Gladys Archer?"
—"Sixpence, Miss Pope." "Marjorie Crawford?"—
—"Threepence," and so on to the last name.

"Selina South?"

"Sixpence."

She wondered for an anxious moment if the head-

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mistress would realise that she had not put up her hand or acknowledged any sort of pocket-money; but Miss Pope was far too busy to notice or to remember such a thing. She was well-pleased to have drawn a generous response from her pupils, and after a few more words, explaining the Mission, and announcing that the Prefects would collect the money next week, she gathered up her papers and went out of the room.

Selina heaved a sigh of relief and satisfaction. During the buzz of illicit conversation that followed Miss Pope's departure she realised that no one else had detected what the mistress had failed to see. No one was aware that she had not declared her income, and no one knew how small that income was. At the same time she was credited with the maximum subscription to the Mission; she stood apart from the mere threepenny gang, solemnly pledged to produce sixpence for charitable purposes next week.

The fact that nobody but a conjuror could have produced sixpence out of Selina's moneybox did not daunt her in the least. She possessed actually one penny, and next Saturday would give her one more, but her imagination made no attempt to paint the situation likely to follow. On the contrary it gave her a fine picture of herself as an independent financier. Never in her life had she undertaken any financial obligation—even her Sunday's halfpenny for the plate was pushed into her hand at the last moment. The thought of it swelled her up with pride and self-confidence, and quite restored the lost balance of the day. When one o'clock came, she joined Nurse and Moira at the Students' Entrance with a definite swagger.

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§ 5

All through the day she maintained that swaggering mood. Her early humiliations were forgotten; to hear her talk you would never guess that she had gone into College by the wrong entrance, stood with the wrong form at Prayers, been kissed by Nurse in the dressing-room or worn clothes she was ashamed of. These things had passed out of her mind and the shadow of them did not return, even when Mother rather indignantly refused her request for a blouse and skirt.

"Wait till you have a waist, Selina; then you can think of blouses."

She no longer felt a little girl, and ate her nursery dinner as a being apart. All the time she talked about the College, about the lessons and the mistresses and the gymnasium and her new schoolbooks, and most of all about the glamorous corporation known as The Girls. It was "the girls do this" and "the girls do that" the whole time. Even Cat-face and Rat-face appeared as interested and interesting enquirers. "And one said 'what's your name?'" and I said 'Selina,' and she said 'Selina what?'" . . . Then it was Baa—"She said 'Hullo, kid!' and she had a red tie and a red ribbon on her pigtail . . . and then one of the big girls said . . . and then another big girl said . . ."

In the end Nurse said:

"That will do, Selina. We've really heard enough about the College. Let Moira say something for a change."

"But I haven't told you yet about the College Mission."

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"Never mind. You can tell us about that later. Now, for a change, let Moira tell you how she lost her hoop-stick. . . ."

Selina fell silent, though she did not listen much to Moira. On reflection she decided that it might be as well not to tell Nurse, or even Mother, about the Mission. They would probably think her subscription was too high and make her change it for a threepenny one. Besides, the fact that she now had a secret from them definitely added to her sense of importance and independence. Hitherto she had had few secrets of her own and those she had had she had not been able to keep. But this secret she felt she really would be able to keep, since she was no longer a little girl shut up in the little world of the nursery, but an emancipated being—one, in fact, of the Girls, whose power and glory she could feel behind her, giving strength to her weakness.

That afternoon was rainy, and Mother thought it would be a good plan for her to do her preparation before tea, and then if it was fine after tea she could go over to the Gardens. Selina was only too glad to attack those impressive tasks which she had brought home. The end of the nursery table was cleared, and she sat down to write out Chardenal's fifth exercise, do a sum of compound addition, and read four pages of the reign of King John in Gardiner's History. She felt very solemn and studious and would have felt more so if Nurse's sewing machine had not been working at the other end of the table and Moira had not been running around the room with a doll's pram chanting:

"Ding, dong, dell,
I hope you're quite well."

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To which she added in course of time:

“And have nice things to sell.”

and finally

“and won’t go to hell,”

whereat Nurse stopped the performance.

By then it was time for tea, and the sun was shining on the raindrops that still clung to the window pane. Rose had come in to clear the table, and Selina hastily wrote down an answer to her sum, trusting to inspiration where reasoning had failed. It would be nice to have tea and go out into the Gardens, feeling a very different being from the little girl who had visited them even so recently as yesterday. If only she had a college hat-band to announce her promotion! . . . But she was not going to trouble herself about that just now. Her appearance might not have changed, but her behaviour and outlook had, and would no doubt impress her inferiors.

§ 6

As she walked across the road she could hear that cascade of sound still pouring from the heights of the College windows. It was now more than ever music in her ears, the rhythm to which her life was set—*tum*, tum, tum, tum, *tum*, tum, tum, tum—more inspiring than the beat of the drum to the marching troops. She glowed and cavorted—“Selina! Selina! you’re showing your drawers.”

Nurse turned the key in the garden gate, glad to have such an excitable little girl safely out of the street. The

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Gardens looked cool and sunny and still. It was about five o'clock, but the September shadows were already lengthening, and across the Upper Lawn spread a low, sweet-scented cloud, which was the wafted smoke of the bonfire down by the gardener's cottage. On any ordinary occasion Selina would have felt that catch of Autumn on the air, that sweet sadness which was almost as intense here as in the country. But this was no ordinary occasion, and off she ran, heedless of beauty, to find out who was in the Gardens.

The result was unsatisfactory. None of the usual children had come out for the last hour of sunshine. There was only one Nurse sitting in the summer-house, and she was Derek's. Selina still disliked him so much that she did not even care about impressing him with her adventures at school. Nurse, however, was extremely polite and affable when she arrived.

"Good evening, Mrs. Collins—we seem to be the only ones here today."

"Well, in my opinion it's not a fit time to bring children out into the Gardens—much too cold and damp it's getting, with the days drawing in. I shouldn't have brought Derek, but he was asked to tea at Mrs. Topping's, and after tea she said all the children had better go and play in the Gardens, as it has turned out fine."

"Oh, Mrs. Topping's little girls are here, are they?"

"Yes, and a whole lot of others. It's a party. They're down playing cricket on the Lower Lawn."

Selina felt disappointed. A party was as bad as nobody. They were never allowed to talk to children who had come with parties, even if they knew them; it was an established rule, their Mother and Nurse being well aware of the awkwardness of uninvited but eager

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supernumeraries on such occasions. The little girls had lived through some bitter moments watching their friends frisking in forbidden society, and it seemed an extra special bitterness that such a thing should happen today, when Selina was bursting with the tale of her exploits. Even Derek seemed an attractive listener now that his society was forbidden.

She wondered whom the party consisted of, and strolled off moodily to investigate. In a few minutes she was back, panting and nearly livid with excitement.

"Nurse! Nurse! who do you think is here?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"Why, two of The Girls!"

"Girls at the College?"

"Yes—I saw them down by the steps."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know. But they're the ones that spoke to me this morning. One of them said 'What's your name?'—don't you remember?—and I said 'Selina' and she said 'Selina what?' and ——"

"Yes, I remember. But there's no need to get so excited about it. You'll be seeing them at school again tomorrow."

"I know, but it's different seeing them here. I've never seen them in the Gardens before. I expect they're with Mrs. Topping's party."

"I expect they are. So don't you take any notice of them. Stay quietly here and have a nice game with Moira—we shan't be able to stop very long."

But Selina was incapable of staying quietly anywhere. The thought that the Gardens contained the redoubtable Rat-face and Cat-face filled her with a sort of nervous excitement. She was consumed with a desire

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to watch them, to observe the minutest details of their clothing and appearance, to listen, if possible, to their conversation, and perhaps, as a crowning achievement, attract their notice.

You might not have thought that her encounter with them that morning was of a nature to warrant such an attitude. They had openly scoffed at her, and plunged her into an abyss of shame and misery. At the time she had both hated and feared them, yet here she was creeping after them, drawn as by a magnet to where their whoops and hulloos rang out, leaving Nurse, Moira, discretion and obedience, behind her at the summer-house.

The first shadows were falling on the Lower Lawn and the paths that led to it. Away from the sun the flower-beds were damp, and a faint crushed scent came from them with the fading glow of dahlias and Michaelmas daisies. The Gardens were telling Selina that Winter would soon have come, with dead leaves drifted everywhere and paths and lawns empty and forsaken. Selina and Moira would go back to their walks on the Parade, fires would crackle in their nursery and more excitingly in the second form grate at College. Flowers and lawns and shady paths, green fields and barns, cotton frocks and sunbonnets lay behind them—fires and cosy rooms, the shops lit up for Christmas, children's parties, woolly frocks and cuddly muffs lay before them.

But all these regrets and expectations, which hitherto had always come to her with the scent of Autumn bonfires, were today no more than sweet-scented smoke, drifting round a head that was full of other things. She went down to the foot of the Steps, and found her-

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self in a long, grass path, running between hedges of laurel and euonymus. At the far end was a splash of colour—Cat-face and Rat-face in their party frocks. She had not expected to come upon them so soon—she had thought they were still playing cricket; but something must have diverted them from the game, and as she looked, wondering what they found to whoop about in such a secluded spot, she saw that the diversion was none other than Derek Foxe. They had actually got the horrid little boy with them, and he was causing them uncontrollable mirth.

Selina's first emotion was one of envy. To make the gods laugh was a distinction of which Derek was quite unworthy. Moving slowly towards them over the grass, she saw that their merriment was caused by the fact that they were trying to make him stand on his head, and mixed with their roars of laughter came his feeble bleat—"I'll tell Mother . . . I'll tell Mother."

Selina stood still and gazed fascinated. It was Derek's fate to appeal to the latent sadism of the opposite sex, and Cat-face and Rat-face were certainly giving him a very rough time.

"Lemme go," he squeaked. "Lemme go."

"Not till you've kicked that branch. You've got to kick it three times and say between every time 'I'm a horrid little muff' and then —"

But Derek had managed to break free, and was off, running down the path towards the Steps. Only Selina stood between him and liberty, for at the top of the Steps his yells would reach his nurse's ear even if he himself did not catch her eye. But Selina acted promptly, she rushed forward and seized hold of him. He kicked

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and hit her, but she was able to cling to him till Cat-face and Rat-face came up and took him in charge.

"Hullo, it's you, is it? Got any ink on your pinafore yet?"

Selina made no reply, but she was not offended. The question had lost its sting and had become in some strange way a compliment—the compliment of notice from high places. She stood by admiringly and watched them put Derek through his ordeal.

"He's a horrid little muff—he ran away from a cricket ball."

"I—I don't like playing cricket, ethept with tennith ballth," piped Derek with his head on the ground and his legs waving wildly in the air.

"That's not what you've got to say. Kick that branch and say 'I'm a horrid little muff'."

Derek kicked, but not the branch.

"Look here, you," said Rat-face to Selina, "you hold one leg while she holds the other. I can't leave go of his arms."

Selina, proud and honoured, seized hold of one of Derek's wildly waving legs. He had rather curious stockings—his best stockings, knitted by his Nurse of light brown wool shot with red silk.

"Now kick that branch and say ——"

This time Derek said it. Purple in the face, he burst into tears and spluttered "I'm a horrid little muff." He said it two and a half times and was then released, for everyone was tired of holding him.

"That's it—run and tell Mother!" shouted Cat-face.

"Tell-tale-tit, his tongue shall be slit," yelled Rat-face.

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"Of all the little muffs I ever saw—eight years old and afraid of a cricket-ball."

"And dressed in a velvet suit."

"With a lace collar."

"And he's got orange stockings," added Selina, puffed up by her association with the great ones.

They both turned upon her.

"You're not the one to talk about his stockings. You've got *socks*."

Selina would have given anything not to have spoken, but it was too late.

"Socks," repeated Cat-face, "socks and a pinafore."

"And yet she's cocky," said Rat-face.

"She won't be cocky long," said Cat-face, "it's her turn next."

"Yes, it's her turn."

Almost before Selina knew what was happening they had seized hold of her, and were trying to get her head down.

"You're to stand on your head and say 'I'm a cocky little beast' three times."

"No, no . . ." spluttered Selina. "Lemme go."

Her hero worship was not equal to this and she struggled desperately.

"You're to kick that branch and say— 'I'm a cocky little beast'."

"I won't! I won't!"

"You will! You will!"

One was holding her head and the other her feet and she was still resisting them with all her power when all of a sudden they let her down, and she fell on the grass with a vision of Nurse before her eyes.

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"What are you doing? How dare you?" said Nurse in an awful voice.

She stood at the end of the path at the bottom of the steps, and Selina's first feeling of relief was succeeded by one of anxiety. What would she do next? What would she say?

She said:

"If two big girls like you can't enjoy themselves without bullying poor little children, I don't know what we're coming to. Derek is almost in a fit, and if I hadn't come just in the nick of time you might have hurt this little girl very badly."

"We were only playing," mumbled Cat-face.

She and her companion both looked rather hang-dog, but not nearly so hang-dog as Selina, who was reliving all the humiliations of the morning, pressed down and running over into one anguished minute.

"I don't call that playing," continued Nurse; "don't you know that it's very bad for children to stand on their heads? The blood runs into them. And anyhow such behaviour can't be allowed in the Gardens. What's your name?" she added suddenly to Cat-face.

"Nurse," moaned Selina.

But Nurse took no notice.

"What's your name?" she repeated.

"Frances Mann."

"And where do you live?"

"In the Springfield Road."

"And what's yours?" —to Rat-face.

"Maude Burrows."

"And where do *you* live?"

"In Markwick Terrace."

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"Very well, then. I shall take steps. Such things can't be allowed in the Gardens. Come along, Selina."

She strode off, looking twice her usual size and leaving Cat-face and Rat-face decidedly deflated. Selina gazed at them in an agony of apology and shambled after Nurse.

"Nurse, how could you?" she wailed as soon as they were on the Upper Lawn.

"How could I what?"

"Speak to them like that."

"I shall speak to people how I please, Selina. And they deserved a very severe talking-to."

"But, Nurse, they're two of the Girls."

"I don't care anything about that. If there's one thing I hate it's bullying, and though you brought it on yourself by going off when I'd told you to stay near the summer-house, that makes no difference where they're concerned. They're very naughty girls."

"But, Nurse, they're sure to come to me tomorrow and ask if the blood's run into my head or something."

"Then they'll be very rude as well as naughty, and you must take no notice."

"But, Nurse ——"

"Now, Selina, that's enough. It isn't only what they were doing to you—it's poor little Derek. He's still crying—I can hear him—" so could Selina. "It was a dreadful way to treat a delicate little boy. My mind's made up."

"Made up to what?"

"To tell your mother, so that she can write to those girls' mothers and have them punished. This thing must be put an end to at once."

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A little to her surprise, Selina, who had not shed a tear until now, burst into wild and frantic sobbing.

"Nurse, you can't! you can't! You mustn't! You can't! Oh, I shall die of shame! I shall die! I shall die!"

"Be quiet, Selina. I won't have you making a noise like that. I'm surprised at you. Come along—we're going home at once."

By this time they had reached the summer-house, where Derek was also sobbing loudly. His nurse turned from him for a moment, with sympathy for his fellow-victim.

"Poor little things—look at them both, simply shaken up to nothing. Never mind, dear, those naughty girls shall be punished, as I've told Derek."

At the sight of Derek, Selina's grief at once became laced with fury.

"You horrid little beast!" she sobbed, "it's your fault, screaming and yelling and telling tales—'tell-tale-tit, your tongue shall be slit'."

"You're a horrid girl," howled Derek. "You held my legth."

Selina made a dive at him, but was seized by Nurse.

"You're to come home at once. I do hope you'll forgive her, Mrs. Collins, but of course she's upset with all this."

"Of course she is, poor lamb. Best take her home and put her to bed with a nice hot drink."

"Come along, Moira," said Nurse.

Moira regretfully withdrew from the contemplation of Derek.

"Nurse, he puts his tongue out when he cries. Is that because he's a boy?"

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"Nurse," wailed Selina. "You won't tell Mother, will you?"

"I shall certainly tell your mother," said Nurse.

§ 7

It was a dreadful ending to her first day at school. There she was crying and sobbing like a baby, though she had decided that very morning that as a member of the second form she would never cry again. To see her that evening you would think she was a little girl like Moira—who, indeed, shed no tears at all but watched her sister's agony with detached interest.

Mother came up to the nursery and told her not to be so silly.

"Really, Selina, I can't understand you, and I certainly must look after you since you can't look after yourself."

"Mother, if you write to those girls' mothers I can never hold up my head again."

"Don't talk such nonsense, dear. I'm ashamed of you."

Here, fortunately, there was an interruption.

"Baa's coming," said Moira.

"Baa?"

"Yes, I can hear her running upstairs and hitting the banisters."

Moira was right; the next moment Baa burst into the room, yards ahead of the announcing Rose.

"Hullo!" she cried. "I hope you don't—what on earth's the matter?"

"Oh, Baa," wailed Selina, "such a dreadful thing has happened," and she began to pour out her story.

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"Whoa, kid," said Baa. "I can't understand a word of this."

"Let me tell Baa," said Mrs. South. "I'm sure she'll agree with me."

"No, Mother, please let me tell. Oh, Baa, it was those two girls who spoke to me in the gym; and they made me stand on my head—and now Mother wants to write and tell their mothers."

"Tell them what?"

"It really was a most shocking case of bullying," said Mrs. South. "Even though it didn't take place in the College I've half a mind to write to Miss Pope about it."

At this Selina burst into dismal wails, and Baa began to question Mrs. South rather anxiously. When at last she understood what really had happened and what really was planned, her face turned decidedly pink.

"They're little beasts—I know who they are, and they're little beasts; but, please, Mrs. South, you really can't write to Miss Pope or to their mothers about them."

Selina was intensely relieved though not surprised to find Baa taking her side.

"Why not?" asked her mother.

"Well, it's not a thing you can do. It would get Selina into frightful trouble, for one thing."

"Into trouble? Who with? I don't care about those ——"

"Oh, into trouble with everyone, even the mistresses. They'd think she was a miserable little tell-tale, and all the girls would think so too. It would be terms and terms before she could live it down."

Her face was so deadly serious that Mrs. South was impressed, in spite of a sudden desire to laugh.

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"But if no complaints are made they may do it again."

"Not they! They'd never dare do it at all at College. It was only because they happened to be in the Gardens . . . and they're hardly ever there, as their parents don't subscribe; they can only go when they're asked, like today. At College everyone knows what they're like and sits on them. That's why they try and get hold of new girls. But now Selina's got her own friends in the second . . . which she won't have if it comes out that you've written to their mothers. . . ."

"If everyone dislikes them so much, they won't mind if they're punished."

"But that's different. Oh, can't you see? . . . It 'ud be awfully bad for Selina. . . . If all you want is to have them punished I could ask them to tea and get in some of the fifth to give them beans. They wouldn't have to know what it was for."

Here Mother laughed, and Selina gave a skip of secret joy, knowing that the victory was won.

"You needn't do that," said Mrs. South. "Since you're both so upset at the idea, I won't write to their mothers or to Miss Pope. But it's on one condition. I rely on you, Baa, to see that this thing doesn't happen again. You must look after Selina."

"Oh, I'll keep an eye on the silly little kid. I called in this evening to see how she'd got on. Good thing I did"—and she shuddered.

When she went away a few minutes later Selina followed her to the top of the stairs.

"Oh, thank you, Baa—thank you so much."

"Thank me for nothing, you idiot. I'm only looking after myself. After all, I live next door and everyone

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knows I know you, so if you utterly disgrace yourself, some of it comes on me. But never mind; cheer up! You haven't done so badly. I'm glad to see that you're not a sneak and that you realise parents must be kept at bay."

Selina had realised nothing of the kind till that moment, when it dawned upon her for the first time as a remotely attainable ideal. Feeling greatly comforted, she went back to the nursery; her first day at College had not ended so miserably after all. Indeed, looking back over it as she lay in bed that night, she was able to see it in much the same joyous light as she had seen it in the morning. If it contained unfortunate episodes it also contained delightful and encouraging ones. Nurse had kissed her in the dressing-room, but she would go across the road with Baa tomorrow morning; she was dressed like a little girl, but she was subscribing sixpence to the College Mission; she had had a painful and humiliating encounter with Cat-face and Rat-face, but it had all turned out right in the end, and Baa had said she hadn't done so badly. She fell asleep without regrets, to wake with a mind refreshed for her new task—the schoolgirl's task of growing as much like everyone else as possible.

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